Writing Islamic Migration

Fiction component: 'The Price of Two Sparrows' – a novel

Exegesis: Representations of Islamic Migration in Three Works of Contemporary Fiction: Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup,* Michael Mohammed Ahmad's *The Tribe* and Amy Waldman's *The Submission.*

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Exegesis: Representations of Islamic Migration in Three Works of Contemporary Fiction: Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup,* Michael Mohammed Ahmad's *The Tribe* and Amy Waldman's *The Submission.*

'The Price of Two Sparrows' tells the story of a proposed mosque development in a fictional town in the Netherlands. The novel's central characters are first- and second-generation migrants: Heico, an Australian-born ornithologist who relocated to his mother's home country as a pre-adolescent; Eliza, his Jewish-American wife who is not sure if she can make the Netherlands her home; Nada, a recent immigrant from Morocco; and Salema, a Turkish-Dutch architect. When a journalist calls Heico to ask him to comment on a proposed development that borders a bird sanctuary, a battle for control of the block of land purchased for a planned mosque begins. The novel plays out against the backdrop of an uncertain period in the Netherlands when two assassinations occurred within the span of two-and-a-half years, both related to issues surrounding Muslim immigration. 'The Price of Two Sparrows' is a work of literary fiction dealing with issues of religion and secularism, science and religion, and the civil and social consequences of new migration trends in Europe.

The exegesis examines three contemporary works of fiction, each dealing with a different phase of migration by people of Islamic faith or background: Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup,* Michael Mohammed Ahmad's *The Tribe* and Amy Waldman's *The Submission.* Together the three novels give an insight into the multi-generational immigration and integration stories of Islamic individuals and families. The exegesis touches on gender and power in migrant fiction; the use of the second-generation child as a literary device to bridge cultures and articulate social critiques; and representations of the second-generation adult, contending with issues of identity, racism and systemic disadvantage.

The Price of Two Sparrows

What is the price of two sparrows – one copper coin? But not a single sparrow can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it.

Matthew 10:29

One belongs to where one lives and here we are

Mario Licón Cabrera

And your house with wind in the windows
instead of curtains
is the house we are building
in the cities of the world.

Naomi Shihab Nye

ONE

Do they not look at the birds, held poised in the midst of (the air and) the sky?

Nothing holds them up but (the power of) God.

Verily in this are signs for those who believe.

Qur'an 16:79

The block of land, when the estate agent first showed it to us, seemed unremarkable: scrubby and fringed with trees of the same type that grew thicker and more numerous in the adjacent forest that turned brilliant, burning colours in autumn and then fell into naked mourning when the coldest days came. The block was adjacent to the recreational space on the edge of the North Sea dunes and was bordered on one side by a train line, rarely used. There was a gas station some four hundred metres up the road and the block we had purchased felt like the kind of place that was forgotten, though we were soon to find out that the truth was rather more complicated than that.

We walked undisciplined routes through the untamed grasses. A group of us came the next day and did it again. We brought two architects back with us and they waved their hands to trace the lines of a building that wasn't yet there and talked about the slope of the block, drainage, local building authorities and council permits.

Perhaps a group of birds flew over as we stood there; maybe one or two stopped to pick over the grasses for fallen seed or hidden insects. We didn't notice.

We liked it. We pooled some funds. The asking price was within our reach and we bought it without trying to negotiate. We brought our families to have a look, from the car, at the block we had

purchased. We had the architects do some sketches. The city newspaper picked up the story. And it wasn't long after that that we learned about the birds.

The Netherlands, July 2003

<> Crown Princess Maxima, pregnant with her first child, is fined for causing a traffic accident <> Following an appeal the court reiterates the eighteen-year sentence for Volkert van der G. for the assassination of politician Pim Fortuyn. The vegan Van der G. has a history of radical animal activism. He claims he killed Fortuyn to defend Dutch Muslims from persecution. <> Lance Armstrong wins the Tour de France for the fifth time <>

It had been over thirty degrees for three consecutive days: a heat wave that crammed the roads to the beach with slow-moving traffic. A squabble of gulls dipped and soared on the thermals above, and a steady stream of cyclists – beach bags slung over their handlebars – whizzed by in the bike lanes, enjoying the feeling of winning for once.

Heico Brandsma was in the dunes, on the edge of the North Sea, rescuing birds from heat exhaustion as they fell from the water-starved trees. A cast of falcons circled and waited above, but today was thirty-five degrees and Heico didn't need to look up; the birds that most needed his attention were likely to be on the ground.

A sparrow lay in his path in the full heat of the sun, beak open, feathers ruffled, panting. 'Here,' he said, gathering the bird softly. She fluttered a weak resistance until he placed her on a damp towel and offered her a little water from a glass dropper, shading her from the sun with his hand.

The truck was a few hundred metres back, at the road. He had set up a mist machine and some water troughs in the shade. There might even be some ice chips still in the cool box on the front seat. He spoke to the bird as he walked, reassuring her that the mist would soon have her feeling better. Despite the heat, Heico was glad to be out here – the air and sun seemed to clear his head.

Back at the office, he had left the graduate students and support staff – those who weren't off on holidays to Cuba, New Zealand or Vietnam – draped over their swivel chairs reassuring each other that it was much too hot to work. And all over Europe, birds were falling from the sky.

It was the following afternoon when a journalist called. He wanted to ask about the flight path of the migratory coastal birds over the site of the new development that bordered the dunes on the edge of town. It was the first Heico had heard of it. The development, that is. The birds, those he knew about: the bee-eaters and hoopoes that flew north along the coast in spring, the shearwaters and gannets that flew south in the fall. He frowned and asked for the street address. 'Near the railway? Can you give me an hour to look at it? Call me back and I'll have something for you.'

Heico knew the site: a clear green patch beside the through-road in an area that he thought had been zoned for a pancake-, or perhaps a wok-restaurant a few years back. He called Imogen into his office and asked for a map of the site and the surrounding area showing all flights by the tagged birds.

The tracking had been running for a few years. The Hoopoe Project, they called it, though it monitored the migratory paths of several different species that followed the coastline in their seasonal migration. Heico hoped to secure funding from the EU to expand the project over the next few years to include cooperation with partners in Cape Town and Birmingham and more resources here in this office: new equipment and extra personnel.

Imogen brought him the GIS images year by year. Each of the tracked bird's data could be extrapolated to show the probable migration patterns of their entire group. She flipped through the images on her laptop. 'I can average them out over any time period ...'

He shook his head. 'It's for a newspaper. No one will be able to read the GIS images anyway. Give me the last twelve months, I guess.'

'You're the boss.' She did this thing: a long, slow blink, and pushed herself up from her seat in a way that reminded him, for some reason, of a baby giraffe. At the doorway she turned back toward him. 'I'll have the file ready to email in twenty minutes.' She swanned through the open-plan pens outside his office but he wasn't watching anymore.

Imogen had told him once, at a Christmas party, that she thought the other women in the office made too little of themselves. He'd shrugged. He had had too many drinks by then but he knew now that he should have said something in their defence. These sorts of discussions were dangerous

territory. You could lose your job, especially in a ‘satellite office’ like this one. The suits in The Hague would put a woman in. There were a couple knocking at the door: two of the objects of Imogen’s comment in fact, fiercely competent women whose loyalty to him, might prove thin if the circumstances were right.

We’re here to protect the birds, he reminded himself, the rest is distraction. He picked up the phone and dialled Imogen’s extension.

‘Couldn’t bear to be without me?’ she answered.

‘Overlay them all on one map,’ he said.

‘Sorry?’

‘Do one map with all the migration trajectories since we started tracking on it.’

She was silent for a moment. ‘I can average it out ...?’

‘Just put it all on the one map.’

‘For the city paper? They’re not going to have a clue what they’re looking at. It’ll look like thousands of birds fly over this one narrow stretch.’

‘Precisely,’ he said. ‘Give the developers something to think about.’ Heico hung up before she could respond. He sighed and swivelled on his chair to stare out the window at the empty farmland and watery ditches that stretched out in columns behind the office.

Heico worked late but it was still full daylight when he left the office. He liked the ride home between stretches of agricultural land along a tree-lined bike path. This evening the swallows cruised close to the ground over the fields and dipped low at the irrigation channels to feed on insects, their metal-blue wings, their orange breasts as light as sky, tails forked like Japanese kites.

The need to protect the birds’ habitat seemed self-evident to Heico. He was surprised when people he met socially seemed to think otherwise. The ‘yes but’ crowd: otherwise intelligent individuals who were surprisingly cavalier when it came to the trade-off between bird species and jet skis, restaurant developments, even a favoured cleaning product. And then there were the people who never seemed to see the birds at all. Bird blindness, a malaise frightening in its specificity and

completeness.

Heico rode under the viaduct and thought of Pim Fortuyn and his ill-fated statue, beheaded in a clanging moment of concrete and bronze by a viaduct too low for the delivery vehicle to pass under.

'He sure knew how to make a statement,' he'd said to Eliza when they showed the headless statue, standing on the back of a yellow tow truck, on the evening news.

The beheaded statue was an apparition as dramatic as Fortuyn's presence had been. The statue's bronze hand was raised to brow height in Fortuyn's signature salute. Without a head the statue had reminded Heico of the Magrittes they had seen once on a weekend trip to Brussels. A ghost for the materialist age, broadcast by every medium now available: an alarmingly effective campaign considering that he was dead.

Fortuyn had been an anomaly in a relatively homogenous political landscape: a charming, coiffed and costumed, King-Charles-Spaniel-accessorised Sociology professor; an old-school Catholic who was also gay and wealthier than the Dutch liked to confess to being. His assassination – over a year ago now, by an animal activist on a bicycle – had had a surreal, couldn't-happen-here quality to it that Heico had still not managed to shake off. It was as if the man had never really existed – too colourful, too dramatic for the low lands. Too flamboyant for his political ambitions to be taken seriously here.

'A leader fits his times, like a leopard waiting for his prey,' Fortuyn had said and after his death, the country, reeling from the shock, wondered if maybe he hadn't been right after all. If someone had been motivated enough to kill him, it might have been because Fortuyn was the only one brave enough to speak the truth: multiculturalism had failed and Holland was being 'Islam-ised' under their noses.

By the time Heico got home, Eliza had cycled out to the Shabbat service and Woolf ('as in Virginia,' as he'd explained a thousand times since Eliza brought the beagle over from the States) was bored, trailing around Heico's feet, wanting to be walked.

Recently Eliza had begun to attend services at the Reformed synagogue in a neighbouring

town. Heico hadn't thought of himself as having any particular religion since he and his mother moved to Holland two-and-a-half decades ago, so Eliza's plan to raise their children as Jewish – though she herself was not observant at the time – seemed to solve a problem. He thought religion was good for instilling values in children and the thought of raising their children in the church of his own childhood made him feel slightly ill.

But then the children didn't come. As the years went by he began to picture those children-that-never-were in skull-caps and head-scarves, and then later in sepia-toned outfits from *Fiddler on the Roof*. This disturbed him, as if the children who hadn't arrived at their semi-detached row-house existed instead somewhere in Tsar Nicolas' Russia, eating beets and playing dreidel in the dirt. But something stopped him from telling Eliza about this, so he suffered this recurring daydream alone.

Eliza had told him once that when she was very young she had been on the lookout for the Messiah among her classmates. Tireless and certain, she had even, for a while, suspected herself, until some teaching at the synagogue had set her right with some technicality or other.

He loved Eliza in a way he had never really been able to explain to himself. It was as if the universe was copied inside her and by loving her he could love everything and everyone. And the mystery of her – softened perhaps by the years – was, for him, the mystery of everything: why was life so various, so sudden, so tragic, so finite and so complete?

The house was quiet, in the way of long summer evenings, daylight still streaming in when it was time to prepare for sleep. He could hear the neighbours washing the dishes and putting the children to bed. When Eliza was not back by ten, Heico assumed that she would return on foot, as she sometimes did, leaving her bike outside the Temple to be picked up later with the car.

She did not like to shop on Saturdays anymore, though they had regularly done this in their student days and she had never questioned it. Now she complained that it wasn't very nice of the Dutch to close their shops on Sunday since she didn't know a single Christian who cared either way and any number of Jews ended up eating tinned fish for dinner on Sunday night, having been unable to shop all weekend.

This type of discussion made Heico feel tired. He didn't know whether to defend the policy,

the shops, the country, the Christians or himself. Eliza's discontent was new, it seemed, and he felt guilty in a generalised sort of way, although he wasn't sure what, if anything, he could have done to prevent it.

Eliza had been 'pre-law' when they met. She had left before she had had a chance to attend law school, to be with him: a debt he could never repay and to which she never alluded, and this alone was a generosity he wasn't sure he himself would have been capable of.

Now she worked in marketing for a multinational electronics company who apparently liked their employees to be bright, energetic and to work until they had dark rings under their eyes and fell asleep against the window on their train ride home. Heico could barely listen all the way through to her work stories, populated as they were with click-throughs, market shares, SWOT analyses, sales forecasts and brand bonding. He sometimes thought if he broke into one of these narratives to tell her he was going to die in the next two to five years, she would respond with life-cycle analysis, limited line strategies and decline stage ROIs. But this was unfair. It was only that she seemed to need to empty her workday out in front of him each evening before she could unravel into the Eliza he knew, Eliza with an unselfconscious laugh and a careless flair for cooking and buying exactly the right gift.

He made a pot of tea in anticipation of her arrival. He selected the 'I love tits' mug he had brought back for her from the British Ornithological Society conference. It had made her laugh when he gave it to her, but she never seemed to use it. He found some *spekkoek* in the pantry and cut the layered cake into two pieces and placed them on two small plates.

But when Eliza arrived she waved away the mug of tea he held out to her. She was tired, she said. The sunset services ran very late this time of year.

'I think I'll just go to bed.' She gathered her shoes from where she'd slipped them off.

He had wanted to tell her about his day, about how Onno had called and asked for a map of every bird nesting in the sanctuary. Heico had laughed, thinking it was joke.

'Impossible,' he had told his boss.

A silence followed.

'What's it for?' Heico asked. 'Maybe I can pull together some rough numbers.'

'The Minister wondered,' said Onno. 'I'll tell her it's not possible.'

'If we had more resources …'

'I know,' said Onno. 'Maybe when the next round of grants comes through.'

By the time Heico had brushed his teeth and got into bed beside her, Eliza was already asleep.

When he woke up, Eliza was making breakfast. She pouted when Heico appeared in the kitchen. 'I was going to bring it to you in bed.'

'I can go back to bed…'

'It's not the same.' Woolf was nuzzling at her bare legs and she leaned down to feed him a piece of sausage.

'Sure it is.' He slipped back into the bedroom, reaching for a magazine from her bedside table to kill the time until the food was ready.

She had reflexive generosity in her cooking, as in everything. He put it down to the abundance of her American childhood. She still made him bacon, though she'd stopped eating it herself, and she didn't see anything strange in serving plates of food neither of them could finish.

Eliza came into the room and passed him the breakfast tray. The dog settled on his side of the bed and watched him expectantly. Woolf had shown no interest in following his mistress in going kosher.

'You're not having anything?' Heico asked Eliza.

'I had some yoghurt. I've been up for a while.' Her eyes far away.

When she'd first moved here from Boston she had seemed happier and more alive here, free of her family and friends and of some old version of herself that she seemed to have tired of somehow. Not long after she arrived, she had signed up for a plot in the community garden. She grew vegetables and herbs, and she knew the names of the people who held the adjacent plots. The time spent in the sun, before she had found work here, seemed to make her stronger and more self-contained. She had joined an amateur theatre group in Amsterdam to make friends. She was always cast in roles louder, brighter, harder than she herself was and Heico found it unsettling to watch the ease with which she

could inhabit someone else's psyche.

'Everyone OK?' he asked. Her sister, Ruthie, sometimes called late on a Friday night – waking Eliza at six or seven on Saturday morning.

'Mostly,' she said, climbing back into bed beside him. For a moment she looked up at the ceiling. 'What do you know about the graves in the dunes?'

'The War graves?' It was the sort of historical site that Heico had learned to expect at every turn. Here, the world was layered with history and meaning. A monument to some almost-forgotten-something on every corner of Amsterdam; the golden age commemorated in every quarter of each city in the merchant houses, weigh stations and warehouses that lined the canals. Just yesterday, the city newspaper had reported that some people in the area felt it was disrespectful to consider a mosque just on the other side of the World War II resistance fighters' graves. He usually thought of the dunes as untamed places – but they too held human stories: bunkers from the War, and the graves. 'I've been meaning to take you out there. We can go this weekend if you want,' said Heico.

Eliza pulled a face and shook her head. 'No, it's supposed to be sunny. We can go some other time. Let's go to the beach.'

The call to prayer came early here. In the summer months, the first light breached the horizon a little after three a.m. And here, so far from the mountain home where Nadia had grown up, the call was not the sound of the muezzin (her grandfather's brother, when she'd been small, and later an uncle) but the sound of Youssef's digital alarm clock – harsh and electronic – rousing them from sleep to wash and then pray before the long day began.

Nadia did not mind the early rising because it gave them time – after the prayer but before Youssef had to leave for work – to linger over tea as the light rose to reach through their apartment window, high above the ground.

'People weren't meant to live this far from the earth,' she had said to him not long after she had first arrived. He had laughed and then, seeing her face, he had stopped and asked her if she was uncomfortable.

She had lied, to cover her foolishness: 'No, of course, it's only that I'm not used to it.'

His face had softened in concern.

She had not mentioned it again, and now she had grown accustomed to it. All except the strangeness of the elevator – a windowless box – too narrow to be comfortable if another person crammed in beside her with their bags of groceries; too sterile to feel like anything more than a metal coffin if she was alone.

It was foolish of course. Tall buildings were everywhere in this part of the city and she was grateful for the comfort of his home with its many gadgets – a special machine for making coffee and another for making tea – and the way the outside temperatures could be made irrelevant with the

touch of a button.

He never lowered the window shades against the heat outside. She, from habit, still did though the air conditioning made it unnecessary, and Youssef, returning from work – late but still while it was light – would declare it depressing and walk around the house flinging them open, even in rooms they rarely used, with the air of someone doing her a great favour.

'See,' he'd say when he was done, 'Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth!'

Nadia would lower her eyes and pour them tea and Youssef would look out at the city, still filled with all that long, empty light, and she would wonder what he was thinking about.

At the community centre, the women's area felt thin and under-attended. The women did not have to come and children – mostly – kept them from Friday prayer. Those that did come rushed to gather themselves, pulling their clothes around their bodies, the haste and bustle of this country: drawing their skin tight, pulling their attention away from one another back out into the world. They spoke Dutch, mostly, even among themselves, though many of them knew French, Arabic and Berber.

Nadia watched from the back, folded in among the women's clothing, as her husband greeted acquaintances with a nod or an outstretched hand. He did not look back and she did not expect him to.

The women prayed and then dissolved into cliques and Nadia slipped between them, out into the summer air. She lingered longer than necessary in finding her shoes. Around her the women talked of children and men, they talked of food preparations, they talked of this new country and the old one, but, mostly, they did not talk to her.

Though her sister- and mother-in-law sometimes attended Friday prayer, they often had other things to do that kept them away. Their lives had many centres. Youssef's mother, when they saw her, was kind but she kept herself a little distant. Nadia felt unmoored by this, so that she found herself constantly looking in mirrors – in the homes she cleaned, or in shop windows as she passed them – touching her face as if to confirm her own existence.

The women Nadia's own age, those who were born here, wore their hair pulled into a bun beneath their brightly coloured hijabs. They wore fashionable jackets belted at the waist. The colours

of their headscarves were echoed in their eye-shadow and handbags.

These were the women that Youssef and his family had found unsuitable when he needed a bride. They had a sharp quality. They were not only present, but in some way they always seemed to be presenting themselves to be seen and observed, often to be heard, both by women and by men. *Here I am*, their bodies seemed to say. *Pay attention to me*.

It was best not to judge the others – their world so different from her own. Still, she lowered her eyes instinctively rather than meet their open gaze. Beautiful women just emerging from an adolescence bright with consumer goods.

The men, too, lingered in groups. They responded to one another in gestures she did not recognise – as if they spoke another language even with their bodies. They held their bodies at strange, uncomfortable angles, their eyelids shading their eyes in a type of lethargy she has not seen before. Or perhaps she was mistaken, maybe it was not lethargy but a slow mistrust, perhaps they were hiding a part of themselves from each other.

On the noticeboard, above the shoe rack, someone had posted the artist's impression of the mosque they planned to build. The design was based on circles. The perfect figure. Inside and out the design included hundreds, maybe thousands, of circles. To represent the perfection of God, the imam had said.

Youssef gave generously to the fund for the mosque. So did his father. There were resources enough, she knew. It was only the permission to build that they needed, and she was impatient, on behalf of the whole community, for construction to begin.

Nadia longed to see the new mosque raised into being – and though she knew it was ridiculous to feel this way – she felt proud of it in advance and wished that it already existed. Months from now it would stand – breathing light and air. She felt almost like the building itself would care that she belonged to it. She knew it was prideful to think of it this way. They would build it for God, but it would be a place to belong to somehow, here, so far from home.

It seemed to Nadia, that once there was a building that was theirs, the community would be able to settle and expand. There would be somewhere to go, not just on Fridays when they all gathered to

pray, but anytime – to seek guidance or peace, to rest or pray. And though they did not plan to have a call to prayer, the mosque would be there when they woke and when they went to sleep. The building itself would be steadfast and permanent in the landscape. Once the mosque was built she could have a role: she could help with the food maybe, or some other small task, there would be a place for her in the community.

She wanted to return to an earlier version of herself – the language embedded in her body, the words that acknowledged Allah by the very repetitions of His name: prayer interwoven into everyday statements about errands and daily plans. And though she had heard the women here invoke him in their Dutch, it sounded, to her ears, a strange mingling of unlike things.

There were birds nesting in an empty church a few kilometres away. The building had been empty for as long as Heico could remember, but a week ago Father Edwin, from a neighbouring parish, had called Heico's office concerned that they might do some permanent damage.

Heico and the priest entered through a side door into the cool of the sacristy. Heico shivered and, though the priest paused a moment to inspect the contents of a tall cupboard, Heico moved past him into the multi-coloured light of the church beyond, a sense of relief upon him as he escaped the low ceiling and residual rows of silverware and tidy piles of altar linen.

'Good thing I dropped by,' said Father Edwin when he joined Heico a moment later. 'There's few things in there I can use.'

Heico turned to face the altar and bent to touch his knee to the floor, a childhood habit, though surely the tabernacle had been emptied some time ago. Father Edwin noted this without comment. He turned to look at the sanctuary briefly, before gesturing towards the back of the church. 'Shall we ...?'

Something in the dust-thickened air made Heico light-headed. He reached out to the nearest pew for support and swung his body on to the seat.

'I'm sorry,' he said. His chest was tight.

'Do you need to get some air?' The priest gestured with his keys that they could return, the way they had come.

Heico looked back towards the sacristy. 'No, it's OK. Just give me a moment.'

The priest seemed relieved. He rested his hands on the end of the pew and waited without

speaking. His fingers were long, his hands fair and hairless. Priests always positioned their hands as if they might at any moment be called upon to perform a magic trick.

Heico gathered himself. ‘Let’s take a look.’

He followed Father Edwin into the choir loft to better inspect the mud nests. They could hear the birds’ small *witt-witts* coming from the nest above. The chicks’ beaks were a thin yellow line, until they opened them and then they were almost the size of their tiny heads.

‘Barn swallows,’ said Heico.

‘We can go higher,’ the priest said. He indicated a wooden ladder inside the spire itself.

Heico shook his head. ‘There’s nothing we can do today. Those are young chicks. You’ll have to wait until they migrate in the winter and then you can dismantle the nests. There are box-nests in the sanctuary, in the dunes. When they return next year they’ll be grown and we can take them there.’

He shook the priest’s hand as he left, but when he related the day’s events to Eliza that evening he found he was angry.

‘What harm are those birds doing in a building no one uses? The church would have been flattened years ago if local building codes allowed it! And the silverware, still there in the sacristy – it’s like a joke.’

Eliza only looked at him with wide eyes. ‘What was he supposed to do? If the bishop told him ...’

Heico exhaled. The intensity of his annoyance about the episode surprised him. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I don’t know.’

When Juliaan, the journalist from the city paper, called to request an in-person interview Heico had suggested the pub that overlooked the main road out to the beach: a place of dark wood that reminded Heico of country pubs in English towns.

Juliaan ordered them both coffees and flicked open a notebook. ‘Is it OK if I record this?’

Heico shrugged his permission.

‘I’ve done some research.’ The journalist turned back a few pages in his notes. ‘It seems that the mosque is unlikely to be high enough to directly obstruct the birds’ flight path.’

Despite himself, Heico was impressed. He had dealt with the city paper before and they weren’t known for their investigative reporting. Once, a few years back, they’d sent someone to the office to write a profile piece. The reporter had asked questions like: what’s your favourite bird? Which is your favourite local restaurant? Then she had arranged him in front of a filing cabinet and taken a photo in which there appeared to be a plant growing out of the top of his head. They had published it anyway.

‘The development is a mosque?’

‘Don’t you think,’ Juliaan said, and he leaned his head to the side as if to imply a real curiosity, ‘that the migratory birds will find a way around one more building?’

Heico hesitated. ‘Many migratory birds use architectural landmarks as beacons. Most have stunning visual acuity and can see landmarks from much greater distances than humans. Too many changes in the landscape too quickly and they’re disoriented.’

‘But a disoriented bird is not a dead bird.’ To Heico’s surprise, Juliaan imitated this bird: eyes wide, wobbling slightly on his bar stool, looking left and right with low level anxiety. ‘Presumably in coastal areas he can orient by the coastline? He’s hardly fixating on an empty block beside a railway line.’

‘No,’ Heico conceded, ‘but there are a number of reasons to prefer a clear corridor.’

‘But …’ Juliaan moved his coffee cup and swung a map toward Heico across the table, ‘show me that corridor.’

‘Well it’s not entirely clear of course but …’

He traced a path from the sea over a residential area, a few green spaces and a large area that may have been low level industrial or simply vacant, he didn’t know for sure.

‘But the total area of the reserve is very large – the impact of one new building on its perimeter is surely negligible – even if it were quite large.’

‘A new building comes with the disturbance of its construction. Once in place it will require

infrastructure for cars. Then there is sound. If the proposal is for a mosque there'll presumably be a call to prayer, several times a day, every day, regardless of season. Then there are demands on services: water, power.'

'Actually, the building will be quite efficient in terms of heating and cooling as well as water use. And there won't be a public call to prayer. The designs have been posted in the *gemeentehuis,* for public comment, for a while now.'

'I haven't seen them,' said Heico. He felt deflated as if answering the man in front of him had removed something that was helping to hold him up.

Juliaan scribbled a few notes in his notebook, each preceded by an aggressive little dot that indented the page down the left hand side.

'OK,' he said when he was done. 'I've got it, I think. You don't have anything to add?'

'I think that gives you a basic overview of how things sit.'

Juliaan considered the map for a moment with an air of beleaguered patience and then looked up into Heico's face. Something that might have been sympathy flickered across his features before he looked back down at his notebook and folded it closed.

He is gay, Heico realised. There was a satisfying feeling to it, like the taxonomic exercises they'd worked through in college: categorisation made the world feel reassuringly ordered. Heico smiled at him and downed the last of his coffee. 'I should get back. Are you getting these?'

Outside a cluster of schoolgirls were sitting with their legs outstretched in the sunshine. They had bright skin and imperfect hair, compressed bodies and early curves: youth pressing out of them into the world. And the boys too, he saw now, moved with an energy flowing through their bodies as if they had furnaces within. Their limbs were over-long and their faces betrayed an effort he remembered feeling in the company of peers at the same age. *Be someone*, he could remember repeating under his breath. Now he can't really remember what he meant by it.

Born in Perth, his parents had named him Heico after his great-grandfather on his mother's side. During his childhood his mother liked to go home to Holland for Christmas. But that was when the

Northern European days were darkest and his dad resented the grey, dead afternoons spent in Oma's kitchen watching the women talk. He did not understand Dutch and relied on Heico as a patchy and impatient translator. When they got home Dad would joke about thawing himself in the January sunshine like a pack of sausages that had been stashed in the freezer.

Most years they couldn't afford to go to Holland though, and his mother sweated and wilted through Christmas, remote and apathetic. She could not accept the reality of a Christmas held in the bright, baking December days – barbecues, salads and thongs – and she told friends that it felt like she had lived many years running without having a Christmas at all.

After his father left, his mum was homesick all the time. Telephone calls were expensive, and Heico would find her sobbing at the kitchen bench when he arrived home from school. When he finished primary school his grandparents bought them one way tickets and he and his mum packed up and flew half way around the world to move into his Oma and Opa's house, with its impossibly steep staircase, its sloped-roofed attic and tiny backyard.

When they arrived, it was more than six months before a new school year would start so they enrolled Heico into an international school and it was there that he discovered that though he could speak Dutch passably well, he could not write it. The frustration of those days seemed endless. Sentences were elaborate mysteries; textbooks were obtuse and impenetrable; he missed his friends, the space to be alone, and the nothingness of living where things were so familiar you did not see or feel them.

In the spring, Heico found a stash of Asterix and Obelix comics of mysterious provenance in a cupboard at his grandparents' house and he used them to train himself to read Dutch, stretched out on the floor in the attic where the grown-ups mostly left him to his own devices, assuming he was studying or at least well out of trouble.

In the afternoons he'd take his bike and ride as far away from his grandparents' house as he dared – along the canals to the agricultural areas, or under the highway overpass, or out towards the sea. The freedom his bike gave him was the only compensation for their move and his mother never questioned his safety, as she certainly would have at home. She was different here: more like a child

herself. She slept a lot and his grandparents tended her like a convalescent. She joked with Heico, after they had gone to bed, about their idiosyncrasies and she didn't seem to notice anything strange in her disloyalty.

Though Oma and Opa went to church every Sunday, his mother said Heico did not have to go anymore and she did not go herself. Heico did not question this. They went at Christmas time. 'For the carols,' said his mother. For the nostalgia, he now knew, and to please his Oma. Though his Oma, too, no longer had him learn bible verses in exchange for the shiny guilders she kept in an old teapot on the kitchen window ledge – though she sometimes gave him one for peeling potatoes or washing the downstairs windows.

Opa had retired from teaching history at the local *athenaeum* a few years earlier. When Heico and his mother moved in, it appeared he had been bottling his pedagogical talent for dinnertime lectures and impromptu tutoring sessions when Heico was trying to do his homework. Later, when his teachers spoke of *our forefathers*, Heico couldn't help picturing his grandfather among them, sashed and ruffle-collared, gathered around a table with the civic guard.

After the summer, when the school year started, Heico and his mum moved to an apartment in the part of town where the highway off-ramps led into the city. There was a balcony, but no outside space other than the patch of ragged lawn at the front entrance, and he was even more grateful for his bike than he had been before.

It was around that time that a parcel arrived from his father: a pair of binoculars, wrapped and packed like something fragile and precious – a birthday gift three weeks too late – and Heico had set out to look at the world in a whole new way. His favourite bird then had been the woodpecker. He liked the strange unevenness of their bodies: as if they had been stretched by hand before being sent out into the world.

He hadn't thought anything much of it at the time, but when he arrived at his final school year unclear what to study and the adviser had asked him to think of what had made him happiest when he was a child, he had thought of those woodpeckers. And after he graduated – university behind him more suddenly than he'd expected – he'd been surprised at how natural the fit was. Some days the joy

of just seeing a bird in flight – as he cycled home from work, or watered their tiny garden – surprised him still.

By the end of July Heico was receiving phone calls from the city council. The mosque approval process had stalled, the newspapers were stirring up unhelpful public interest, and everyone wanted the matter resolved.

Peter from the planning office at the city council felt confident, he said, that the problem could be resolved if they all just sat down to talk. Heico was circumspect but he agreed to meet with the committee. He was more than happy to walk them through the data. If they came out to the office, he would book the meeting room and could show them some of their mapping studies and outline the type of outcomes they were trying to achieve for bird habitats in the area. Together they might be able to identify some alternate space for the mosque. And yes, of course, the 'key stakeholders' were welcome to come along too. Perhaps an understanding could be reached once they all understood each other's positions.

August 2003

<> The national weather bureau confirms 2003 is the driest summer on record <> Poet Willem Wilmink dies aged sixty-six <> Eleven year old Lusanne walks in to a hotel two days after being kidnapped on her way to school. <> Massive power outage leaves New York, Toronto and Detroit in the dark <>

And he who associates with Allah – it is as though he had fallen from the sky and was snatched by the birds or the wind carried him down into a remote place.

Qur'an 22:31

The imam preached love of our neighbour from the minbar. 'Do good,' he said 'to your parents and kinsfolk, to orphans and those in need, neighbours who are near and those who are strangers, the companion by your side, the traveller and the slave.' He paused and looked around at us, the words were so familiar there was no need to elaborate. 'And remember that you do not have faith unless you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself.'

Some years earlier, the city council had given us the use of the community centre for our Friday afternoon prayer. We came, religiously at first, Islam still the steady beating heart of our lives. We conducted our regular prayers and ablutions. There was the Friday *ṣalāt* and the long cycles of fasting and celebration. Later, perhaps winnowed out by the pull in every other direction, our attention began to drift back to our office papers and email inboxes.

The Friday morning playgroup leaders unfurled mismatched carpet rolls for us at just the right angle to the *mihrab*, so we could face the *Ka'ba* along with our brothers and sisters around the world. Afterwards we rolled up the carpets and stored them under the stairs as we'd been shown, in an equal gesture of goodwill.

But we dreamed of a mosque where the carpets would not need to be rolled away, with a kitchen where meals could be prepared and we could eat together, and space where our young people

could meet one another and talk. We wanted a place where we would not be looked at as strangers. A place that was an extension of God's world all around us, built in His honour. A place to gather, to pray, to break our fasting together.

After prayer we stood in groups for a few moments, before dispersing, to talk about the world, our work and the word. Our younger brothers were frustrated with waiting for the mosque plans to be approved, and who could blame them? Many of them had never, in their whole lives, been members of a mosque community. Their parents had gathered in shop-fronts and private lounge rooms, and now the community centre, to meet for Friday prayer. Makeshift spaces were the only 'mosque' they'd ever known.

Some of our sisters unwound their headscarves as they left the centre, their heels clicking as they headed for their cars. Others leaned their covered heads together conspiratorially, children around their feet and balanced on their hips. They shared stories about local doctors, fruit stores, the butchers who sold halal meats. Perhaps they'd brought pan-fried bread for us to eat on the way back to work. Or perhaps we'd be searching in the glove box for dates or muesli bars or some loose change, so that our colleagues could grin and say: '*FEBO* again?' as we folded ourselves back behind our desks, back into our workaday lives.

We had long ago embraced the fast-food snacks from the *FEBO*: beef ragout in deep-fried casing, blocks of flavoured noodles or fried rice, their halal status indicated on the yellow plaques above the small hinged windows. This country was filled with temptations behind windows that could be enjoyed for a price.

Sometimes we used the community centre to hold meetings and occasionally the bureaucrats from the council offices came to speak to us. They placed their shoes on the shoe-rack, the women covered their hair with patterned scarves. They bent their heads as if afraid the roof of their community centre was too low for their northern statures. They seemed relieved when we laughed at their jokes.

'Speak to your families in Dutch,' they said. 'Vote in the council elections,' they said. 'Buy your children bikes.'

Meanwhile the city council posted our building plans for the locals to comment on. Our neighbours spoke of migratory birds and rising water tables and we raised our eyes to Allah who has a long and well-documented history of teaching his people patience. And we kept the faith that one day they might approve the plans and we could begin to build a dedicated place for us to worship in this, our new home.

I, myself, did not like to go to the meetings at the *gemeentehuis*. They seemed overblown and operatic when the question was not a large one. We were not proposing a shopping centre; the project did not require destruction of cultural heritage or the dredging of waterways. We understood the need for adaptation to meet local planning regulations and the need to allay concerns about the mosque's impact on traffic, house prices, noise levels and access to the recreation space adjacent to the block. But I did not like the false drama of the situation: as if this was the first new building ever proposed, as if the city council did not deal with matters like this one with tedious regularity, as if, in looking for reasons to stall and equivocate, they were not simply saying *not here, not you, not now*, and hoping that delays alone might make us go away.

We told the children the stories that had come to us through our forebears and through the hadith. Stories of Adam and David and Jesus and Mohammed. They loved the stories with animals in them best and so I told them the story of how the spider protected Mohammed in the cave, and how the birds saved the sacred *Ka'ba* from Abraha and his elephants, and the story of how Solomon rewarded the hoopoes and how he spoke the language of the birds.

One day, King Solomon was riding through the desert. The day was searing hot and the sun burned down on the king and his entourage. The hoopoes – seeing the king's discomfort – joined together to form a canopy and flew overhead to shade him from the sun.

The king was very grateful. 'How can I reward you?' he asked the birds.

The hoopoes met to discuss what they should ask for and they returned with a request: 'We'd like to each have a golden crown.'

Solomon granted their request so that each bird received a small crown made of gold, but he warned the birds: ‘You will come to regret this choice.’

Sure enough, it wasn’t long before hunters were seeking out the hoopoes for their valuable golden crowns. The hunters shot the hoopoes and sold their crowns to passing merchants. So the hoopoes returned to Solomon and told him their story. Solomon changed their crown of gold to a crown of feathers, and the hoopoes flew undisturbed once again.

Nadia stands on the edge of the courtyard, outside the community centre. When the weather is fine Kadim sits on a stool among the children to tell them stories from the Qur'an and the hadith.

The children like the stories with animals the best. Kadim likes the ones with birds. He moves his hands in swooping choreography to tell of the swallows protecting the *Ka'ba*. He stomps his feet to invoke the elephants of Yemen turning for home. *Look*, he says to them sometimes. *Can you see?* and he points to a real bird as it flies overhead or perches, watchful, above them and tells them which it is. He names them in Arabic so that the birds exist in the same language as the Qur'an, though most of the children do not understand Arabic. Many of their parents do not either. He makes the children laugh, animating the characters of the Qur'an with furrowed brow for the villains, puffed-out cheeks for the self-righteous, squared shoulders for the kings.

Watching him Nadia recognises something that she misses here. The way the children gather to sit in front of him and cluster around in that haphazard way children have – she misses that feeling: shoulders, knees, elbows touching. At home their lives seemed to be part of a collective. Not just when they were praying but often, maybe always. Now, when the prayer is over, she stands alone: they all do.

Heico left home early to stop by the block to have a look for himself. He liked the days he got to take the truck out; he liked the crunch of forest debris under his boots. He liked the smell of trees. But often this country felt too small around him. He stood for a moment and inhaled the smell of the land. He could hear the birds but could not see them at first. Their staccato chirrups emanated from the trees.

Sometimes, when he was in the field (which was less often now than it once had been), Heico imagined all the birds looking down on him. He imagined the view the birds would have of him – like countless infrared cameras, as if he were on stealth mission and his observers were letting him be for now but knew in precise detail everything they needed to know. It was because of experiences like this that he understood how the ancients had believed in animal gods. Occasionally he had to resist the same temptation himself. When he was in the field the crackle of his footfall felt as if it reached the ears of some greater being; the soft sounds of the trees or the way a small bird could light at his feet felt like an answer or a warning. At those moments it felt like the universe was alive in a way that he couldn't quite articulate but knew, deeply, to be real.

There was a body of water that ran between the building site and the railway. He walked over to inspect it. It was a wide trench lined on both sides with reeds. He watched a row of greylag geese, their orange beaks held high, sailing tidily by.

Heico couldn't quite believe the can of worms he had opened when Juliaan had first asked for a sound bite for his article about the mosque development. He knew that nobody gave a shit about the birds, many of them wouldn't know a *mus* from a *merel* – and those who did, didn't care. So he was surprised to find himself as the spokesperson for the suddenly bird-friendly town.

You have to understand – he planned to say to the meeting – these tagged birds represent thousands more of their kinds. There is no telling how many birds we are talking about, no telling

how many individual birds this might affect, if you go forward as planned.

In part this is rhetorical. They have a fair idea of total numbers, there is some variation from year to year but 'no telling' is not a phrase he would use with Onno, his boss. But the idea he means to convey is: it's not just about the hoopoe or the bee-eater or the gannet. It's about all birds, future birds, birds that never even venture this far north.

The boardroom felt small once everyone had taken their places: the councillors in suits, the young woman they'd brought to take notes, the men from the Islamic association that had applied for the building permit – among them a younger man who looked familiar though Heico couldn't quite place him. Many of them were leaning forward as if keen to devour whatever it was he was going to put in front of them. Heico had invited the journalist along to the meeting too, and Juliaan had taken a seat at the back of the room, pushed back from the table as if wishing to physically absent himself from the discussion, but he nodded to Heico now and smiled.

'Welcome,' Heico said and several people smiled back a weak, answering smile. 'I'm pleased to have the opportunity to present our data to you.'

One of the councillors – blue-suited and overly tall – sighed, but Heico flicked over to his first slide and began outlining the bird migration patterns that had been observed in the area since the tracking technology had been introduced.

It was towards the end of the meeting that Heico remembered who the younger Muslim man was: Najib Hassan. He played a character in a soap that his mother watched, though on the show he had a heavy Moroccan accent and a bad boy swagger, both of which were conspicuously absent in his in-person demeanour.

'It is not the building itself,' Heico said, addressing his comments to the association, 'but the proposed location that's the issue. It borders an area set aside for recreation and flora and fauna conservation and, though it is not within its perimeter, it is a building of significant size. Some impact on the birds in the dunes is inevitable, and it would have adverse consequences for the bird life in the region as a whole.'

The room fell silent.

Heico cleared his throat. ‘I believe a due diligence process prior to purchase would have revealed that the site is important for coastal bird life as well as being adjacent to an area that hosts wild deer, foxes and rabbits?’

‘Those damn wild deer,’ mumbled one of the councillors.

‘We purchased the land from the previous developer.’ It was Najib who spoke. ‘They had been given permission to build a medium capacity restaurant. We did not think there would be another set of considerations applied if the building was a mosque.’

‘No one asked me to comment on the previous development.’

‘That’s right!’ said Najib, flinging his arms out in a little explosion of frustration at the end of the table.

‘Well,’ said Heico after a pause, ‘if there are no other questions for the moment, perhaps I can ask you all to take a look at our information, and if you have any queries ...’

‘I’m glad you invited me to this,’ Juliaan said to Heico as everyone milled around with coffee cups after the meeting.

A woman in a bright blue hijab pressed carefully past him, her satchel held between her body and his. She nodded at Juliaan.

‘Have you met Salema?’ Juliaan said. Heico had seen her sitting at the back of the room and had wondered how she fitted in. ‘Salema is an architect. She’s based in The Hague.’

Heico reached out a hand and then doubted his instinct and pulled it back. Muslim women couldn’t shake hands with men, was that right? Salema lowered the satchel to hang at her side but she did not reach out a hand.

‘Your presentation has given me a lot to think about.’ She nodded towards the screen Heico had just used to outline his concerns.

‘Good,’ said Heico. ‘You’re putting in a proposal?’

‘Salema’s firm has already been commissioned,’ said Juliaan.

Salema confirmed this with a nod. ‘If you’d like to see our designs … Come down next week

– we'll make a time and I'll talk you through them.'

'They have quite a modern aesthetic,' said Juliaan, after Salema had excused herself and left. 'Most communities want their mosque to look like the mosques back at home, so they were a surprise selection, but, when you think about it: a team headed up by a young, Muslim woman backed by an established architecture firm – it looked good to the local council and the firm played their cards right.'

'According to the information they distributed, almost half of the community was born here.'

'Nostalgia can have a long half-life. Plus the younger people's opinions don't count as much as the elders on the council. The elders could have felt that the design sends the wrong message: that they are willing to compromise their values, to pander to an increasingly secular society. But Salema's firm has the reputation, and she has the energy and vision, and they'll do a good job.' He glanced sideways to where the Mayor stood with his head bent low to hold a discussion with the actor. 'If they get the chance.'

Claartje passed Heico at the bike rack, on her way to her car at the end of the day, her arms full of papers in plastic binders. 'How did the meeting go?'

'They didn't give much away, but I think they heard what we had to say.'

'Great. Well, have a good night.'

'Oh,' said Heico, 'they asked about the historical data. I told them we had it in the stacks and that we're looking to get in digitised. Have you heard anything about the interns we're supposed to be getting?'

'No. Nothing more. It's not a very glamorous project for them.' Claartje shifted the papers to rest under one arm.

'It could be about to get interesting.'

'OK, well, I'll follow up with HR on Monday,' said Claartje. 'Tomorrow's all those meetings and Friday ...'

Heico nodded, though he was not sure why Friday wouldn't be suitable for following this up. 'Well the sooner we have it all digitised, the sooner we can use the data for all our projects.'

‘Right, well, see you tomorrow.’

‘Right,’ echoed Heico and he pushed off and pedalled down the driveway.

‘You want a lift?’ Claartje called behind him.

‘No thanks,’ said Heico as he knew she knew he would.

On the telephone the next day with Juliaan, Heico sighed and leaned his forehead on his hand with his elbow propped on the desk.

‘Can’t they just find some other block of land? Generations of birds have been using this space. Why can’t ...’ He could hear the futility in what he was saying. ‘Can we just ask them?’

‘Do you have another suggestion of where they could go?’

Heico frowned at the files and envelopes languishing in his in-tray. Land was generally zoned for specific uses throughout the province, so it was difficult to think of spaces that could be developed. ‘Can’t some agricultural land be re-zoned?’

‘You want to re-zone green space?’

Heico knew this sounded naive. Generations of planners had held back developers that wanted to rip up the green, watery stretches in the centre of the Randstad. ‘No,’ he said. ‘No, but there must be a spare block in a residential area or ...’

Juliaan was silent on the other end of the line, as if assessing how serious Heico might be. ‘Probably the answer is: no, there’s no block large enough. But assuming you could secure a number of adjoining lots and the council agreed to re-zone, then there’s still the issues of traffic, car parking, any supplier access or waste disposal requirements, emergency exit requirements, noise ... Once these are dealt with you may need consider how the neighbours will take to having a mosque over the back of their row-houses or do you want it butting up against their apartment building so people can drink their morning coffee a few feet from Holland’s newest *masjid*?’

Heico sighed. Claartje was outside his door mouthing something at him through the glass. He nodded at her and waved his arm to indicate he’d come and speak to her in a few minutes.

‘People adapt,’ he said. ‘Or why not build out in those highway-side wastelands between the

cities. Like the Buddhist one.'

He tilted his head in the direction of the golden temple that he had initially mistaken for a lavish new Chinese restaurant beside the highway near Breukelen.

'Well that probably was an option, but maybe they don't want to be stuck out beside the highway like they're a roadside McDonalds or something. And they already own this block.'

After he hung up Heico stood up from the desk. In his mind he saw the world flash forward thousands of years when everything around him would have crumbled to dust and he stood in the midst of the wreckage, purposeless and alone. An old headache eked out its time on the right side of his head. You gave advice and they wouldn't let up until the advice changed or went away, which they knew wasn't going to happen – science, unlike God, not being prone to temperament or entreaty.

Nadia saw very few animals now that she lived here: occasionally a dog tethered outside a shop lugging against the restraint, a few overfed cats on windowsills curled around the base of a pot plant or stretched between two symmetrically placed candlesticks. And there was a man who fed the birds from large bags of seed. She could watch him from the apartment, on weekdays, in the mornings, as the early trains passed. She imagined people watching out the train windows as birds feasted on the seeds he flung in handfuls all around him like a strange dance against the morning sky.

There were days when she walked through the park and watched the yellow-green light that filtered down through the new leaves and the small children who could speak full and perfect sentences of the strange language that even Youssef spoke with a slight accent. And there were days when she thought that she should ask Youssef to buy her a bike, so she could practise whizzing through the park as everyone else seemed to do without apparent effort or shame at the way this activity exposed their bodies to the scrutiny of strangers.

Although Youssef told her that she was beautiful, Nadia knew this was a permissible lie. She knew that she was unremarkable. No one had ever thought of her as pretty among her sisters and cousins. Dark hair and eyes, skin of an even brown, paler than she might have been if she exposed herself the way the Dutch women did to the milky sunlight they lived in. But something about this place made her want to cover herself more than at home.

'They don't like us very much, do they?' she said to Youssef one evening. 'The Dutch.'

He seemed distracted by something on his plate. 'They say their forefathers built this country, digging it out of the sea. Maybe that makes it hard to share ...'

‘Their eyes burn into me sometimes,’ she said. ‘In the shops they look at me like they want to see through me. And the women in their homes: sometimes they can barely look at me at all. They wish I wasn’t there, that they could just come home and their houses would be magically clean without anyone having to have done anything at all.’

‘You should shop at the Moroccan shops,’ Youssef said later. He patted the couch to indicate she should sit beside him. ‘And maybe you can teach me some things too. The shopkeepers laugh at me when I don’t know all the words.’

Nadia lowered her eyes. She would go tomorrow to the shops he had suggested.

When he left the room she twisted her body and pressed her face into the back of the seat until her eyes hurt.

Salema met Heico in the architects' reception area and led him up a theatrical sweep of staircase. She was striking. The long clean lines of her clothing accentuated her slim figure: full length charcoal skirt, a high-necked top and a purple hijab to cover her hair. At the top of the stairs was an area apparently intended to act as a gallery space for showpiece projects. He could feel Salema watching him as he leaned over the model mosque. 'The profile of the building is designed to echo the surroundings. It's inspired by the curvature of the dunes. The parabola we used echoes real sand dune patterns.'

The white exterior did seem to mirror the landscape, scattered liberally with plastic trees, but it also seemed to emerge from it like a spaceship – something foreign and dreamed up.

'We wanted it to be unobtrusive, not a triumphal monument. It needed to match the space. The minarets emerge organically from the structure at the highest points – here and here. This type of design was perceived as less aggressive than traditional minarets in local testing and I think it works in an integrated way with the whole design.'

Heico nodded.

She directed his attention to the poster-sized artist's images of the interior. 'The ceiling, you can see here the shape formed by the light tubes, will also help to absorb sound – otherwise you can get an echo chamber effect,' she said. She moved her hands as she spoke evoking physical space in miniature. She moulded the swollen body of the mosque, and wafted light and air through its eco-blah-blah interior with long slim fingers that mimicked their free passage through the climate-responsive venting system. She watched him intently, as if his reaction to the plans could give her a

clue as to how to proceed.

Heico murmured acknowledgement. The design was clever, he thought, and rather beautiful.

'You see that the construction is from multi-sized tubes that let the light in. The tubes form both the structural elements of the building as well as the basic design concept: one tube, one circle of light for each worshipper, an echo of the traditional prayer mat but in light. Each tube is fitted with a photo-sensitive device that monitors and controls the intensity and direction of the light coming in, supplementing it if necessary on cloudy days or at night. Each tube clicks in to the one next to it so that the mosque is built of many individual pieces, to form one structure. The many joined in community, the one individual before God. Sometimes we forget that the communities who use a mosque are made up of individuals: not kings or sultans – just women, men and children before God. That is what I wanted to highlight. The most important element of the community is the individual person.'

'It's quite modern,' he said.

'It has traditional elements: the curvature that mimics the traditional dome, minarets, a courtyard. Its form reflects its surroundings. Natural light is used and the natural airflow ventilates the building. There is nothing revolutionary in any of this. Its minarets and arches are modest. Only the light tubes are different to anything you would find anywhere else.'

Heico reached out his hand as if to touch the poster in front of him but stopped short. She thought her mosque mimicked the North Sea dunes, but it did not. The dunes in the sanctuary were flatter than those the model-maker had imagined and they were held in place by grasses and trees. Salema's design mimicked the image of a sand dune that she already had in her head. If she had gone out to look at the dunes in the area before working on the design, then she apparently hadn't been able to really see them – her head full of Saharan fantasies, unconsciously echoing the exotic, rather than the local as she had intended.

When he got home, Eliza was flipping lethargically through an old field-guide of European birds that his grandparents had given him more than twenty years ago.

‘Reminds me of Dad’s fish books,’ Eliza said looking up as Heico came in. His father-in-law was a recreational fisherman with a book collection that his children had bestowed on him over successive birthdays when they couldn’t think of anything else he might want. ‘But with fish, the books always tell you whether you can eat them or not.’

Heico went to the fridge, pulled out a carton of apple juice and poured himself a tall glass. ‘One year we got called up because the authorities at Rotterdam had intercepted an illegal shipment of Chinese sparrows – two million of them, frozen – on their way to restaurants in Italy.’

‘What happened?’

‘We told them there wasn’t a lot we could do. I think they incinerated them.’

Eliza grimaced and closed the book. ‘Maybe we should all be vegetarians.’

She stood up abruptly and jammed the bird guide onto the bookshelf on top of a row of novels. She ran her finger along the shelf and then inspected her fingertip.

He watched her move around the room, rearranging photo frames and trinkets. He didn’t like it when she was like this. ‘What is it?’

She shrugged. ‘Just energy.’

This was unlikely to be true.

‘It’s Nadia – the cleaner – she’s got this attitude.’

Nadia was young, early twenties, a recent immigrant with stilted Dutch. They paid her cash. He didn’t remember how they’d got her name but they had been glad to hand over responsibility for the constant cleaning that had seemed to creep in and steal their weekends. ‘I can ask around to see if someone knows someone else.’

‘It’s not that. Maybe we can just give her a key and get her to come when we’re at work.’

‘I’m not really comfortable with that.’

‘She had good references. If you don’t trust her in our house, then why are we using her at all?’ Eliza flopped into a chair by the window. ‘You don’t want her to have a key: fine. We can get her to come just as we’re leaving for work. Let her in and go.’

Heico turned his full attention to her. Her face was flushed, her eyes intense but her focus

inward. ‘OK. Whatever you want.’

‘It’s not because she’s Moroccan.’ Eliza dug her hands into the sofa cushion on either side. ‘It’s because she sighs when I ask her to do something. It makes me uncomfortable.’

Heico shrugged. ‘We’ll do whatever you want.’

‘You don’t have to deal with her.’ She stared out the front window and frowned.

Heico followed her gaze. How was it that red and yellow light could cling around the afternoon clouds as they hid the sun. Like a glimpse of something else, unexplained. And no one ever talked about it – though it was there in the sky for all to see.

It was the end of August, a last bright, clear stretch when students and office workers filled the terraces, their legs stretched out, and the tables were decked with glasses of wheat beer and rosé. The summer had been hotter than any in recent memory and the earth was dry around them.

One night a little after midnight, halfway across the country – the local terraces almost empty, the lights out in all but a handful of houses and 'brown cafes' – a dyke wall gave way. A wave of dark water sluiced free of the *ringvaart* and spread itself wide across the streets for several kilometres in every direction. Houseboats dipped precariously as the water drained from beneath them, out into the surrounding town.

Householders woke to the sound of rushing water and sloshed through the flood-waters to their front doors, flicking uselessly at their light switches. They'd been raised on tales of floods, snatches of national pride about God creating the earth and the Dutch creating the Netherlands, and grey-tone photos of the waterworks in Zeeland and the pump-station at Cruquius in school textbooks. But now the dyke had broken and water was everywhere, half-a-metre deep.

The first thing Heico thought, when he heard the news the next morning, was: where are the archival field records? He knew they were shelved in a bank of metal cabinets they referred to as 'the library.' And though it was miles away, Heico was furious with Claartje. It could have happened here. Their records would be pasty clumps of paper sandwiched between stiff green covers.

Leaving the house he pounded his anger into his bike pedals, travelling faster and more recklessly than usual through the early traffic. He had been asking Claartje to assign scanning these

records to the student interns for several years. He did not understand why it still hadn't been done. All those lifetimes of observations could have been pulp in a metal cabinet. And why? Because she was refusing to do what he asked. As he approached the viaduct he could hear a buzzing in his ears. He wanted to speak to her now. To call her at home and say, 'Have you heard the news? What if that had been here?' But it would have to wait. He needed to calm down before he spoke to her anyway. She could start scanning the records today. She would have to do it herself if she couldn't find an intern to help her with it. He didn't care what pay scale she thought she should be.

But when he arrived Claartje was already there, standing in front of the metal cabinets, the first volume open on top of the photocopier.

'Morning, boss,' she said, her voice uncharacteristically bright.

'You heard about the dyke in Wilnis,' he said, the lines he'd rehearsed on the bike ride useless now that she had already begun.

'Someone mentioned it, yes. I haven't seen the news.' Her lipstick was uneven, already faded at the corners of her mouth and the shade she had chosen verged distastefully towards orange.

'That could have happened here,' he said. He pointed at the floor at his feet. She followed his gesture with her eyes and raised her eyebrows.

'You're right,' she said. 'Though I guess with the coast…' she gestured as if sweeping the imagined flood waters out to sea.

'Let's get these digitised then, shall we?'

'I'll have Judith take over when she gets in. This afternoon I have a phone call about those interns we were hoping to get – you remember?'

Heico's eyeballs felt sore. 'Yes, I remember. Let's get this done.'

Claartje turned back to the photocopier and turned the page with a contemptuous flick. 'Luckily not all of us have religious buildings to put a stop to, or we'd never get anything done around here.'

September 2003

<> Premier Balkenende breakfasts with George W. Bush <> Supermarket concern Ahold faces boycotts and shareholder protests over new CEO Anders Moberg's salary. His salary is lowered and Ahold begins a 'price war' to win back consumers <> The Nederlands Film Festival opens with 'Phileine zegt sorry' based on the book by Ronald Giphart <> KLM merges with Air France <>

Juliaan ordered two beers. Heico reached for his wallet but Juliaan gestured for him to put it away.

'I took in a soil sample,' said Juliaan once they were seated. 'They said: "polder soil, predominantly sand, reflecting the proximity to the dunes," all of which we all knew already.' He watched Heico's face as he took a sip of beer. 'It's not like we are expecting them to stumble on ancient artefacts when they break ground. The land was swamp before it was drained a few centuries ago. It's available land that the Muslim community have already paid for.'

Juliaan seemed to be waiting for a response to this so Heico nodded and said: 'I'm sure you're right.'

Juliaan looked deflated, like he had hoped for a fight. 'Your figures don't add up. I've sat out at the site, and I've checked old records in the library. Anything like the number of birds the information you sent me showed would be highly unusual in any one year. Even if you had observed such numbers in a particular year, the chances of a repeat event would be miniscule to none.'

'You know that I don't actually draw the maps, right? We just plug in the data range and the computer spits it out.'

Juliaan shook his head. 'Look, you're the expert. If you want to stand by the numbers then the newspaper is not going to question your data without some expert who'll go on the record, but ... I'm just giving you an opportunity.'

'What opportunity is that?'

'The opportunity to retract the data. Claim some computer error or whatever.'

'Look, you came to me. You wanted a story. The data comes from our observations; I am

simply supplying you with information, at your request, in the interest of informing the public.'

'You can tell a story in many different ways,' Juliaan said. 'If you read the architect's brief, they estimate that the mosque will need to have the capacity to accommodate two thousand people on their great holy days. This figure will grow if migration trends continue as the department of immigration expect. I could report that the mosque is designed to accommodate two thousand people, or more, but that would give people the impression that every Friday …'

Juliaan looked at Heico for a moment and neither said anything.

'There are only two such holy days each year.'

Heico nodded. Drank.

Juliaan said nothing and sat watching him. 'Are you religious?'

'Huh?'

'I'm asking if you are a believer?'

'My expertise is ornithology; I'm very happy to go on the record about that.'

Juliaan nodded. 'Right. You're right.' He turned the notebook page, though it was still completely blank. 'Let's get some picture of the bird migration patterns throughout the year, then.'

Heico took Juliaan's pen and his notebook and sketched a rough contour of the coastline. He outlined the month-by-month movement of the key migratory species they observed in the sanctuary and the region more generally. 'I can have one of the PhD students send through some specific observations …'

'No,' said Juliaan. He tapped his notebook. 'This is enough.'

'Well,' Heico said. 'Guess I should be getting back.'

'Sure,' said Juliaan. He turned the pages back through his notebook.

'We are paid by the taxpayer so ...' Heico held his arms open to indicate his willingness to help.

'We should go out and have a look at the block together,' Juliaan said. 'I'd like to get your take on the tree profile of the block – you know, for supporting bird life and so on.'

Heico had been planning to go out the next day anyway.

'Great,' said Juliaan. 'Do you mind if I invite the architect?'

Heico watched Salema standing on the edge of the patch of earth they planned to build the mosque on. She looked up as if she could already see the mosque's ceiling, the rush of girders and concrete that would be there if the development went ahead. She said nothing for a long time.

Juliaan glanced across at Heico. Heico shrugged.

'We're wondering if you could give us an idea of the dimensions of the building,' Juliaan said.

She waved them into positions on the block to show the size of the mosque's footprint.

'Right,' said Juliaan.

The base of the building was smaller than Heico had expected.

'Tell us about the building profile,' said Juliaan.

Salema raised her arms and traced curves to match the exterior dome. 'It has a courtyard and, behind, a central dome. A modern take on the traditional form. A way of integrating the old and new styles. Of course it would have all the traditional features inside.'

'And the exterior will be white?'

'Think Greek-island white,' she said.

Several songbirds' metallic chirrups layered on top of one another around them. Heico looked across at Juliaan from where Salema had positioned him. He appeared to be poking quizzically at the soil with his shoe. Heico had to admire him: determined to find out the truth despite the pathetic circulation figures of the paper he wrote for.

'Is someone still arguing the mosque will affect the soil?' asked Heico.

Juliaan frowned. 'Apparently the water table is high and the soil profile is – I don't know – sandy? There are concerns that a building of its size ...'

'What?'

'What am I, an engineer? Will sink into the ground or something I guess.'

Heico looked out towards the dunes. 'Surely that's a risk the previous developer had assessed.'

He looked across at Salema but she didn't appear to be listening.

'They're more cautious than they were a few years ago. Rising sea levels are now considered as a matter of course when assessing the risks involved in a planning proposal in most coastal councils now, certainly this one.'

'You've done your research,' said Heico.

Juliaan sighed. 'This isn't going to stay local. It's going to set a precedent. The EU's watching and –'

'There are already mosques all over the country – and all over Europe.'

'Yeah, well, in the bigger cities there are, but this one's on the outskirts of town; it's in a green space. Sure it was re-zoned for a restaurant or whatever, but this is different. A pancake house isn't a mosque.'

'They should get t-shirts that say that,' said Heico.

'What?' said Juliaan.

'Never mind.'

Heico arrived home late and paused a moment outside his front window. The lamps in the living room were on and he could see his own life from the outside. Leather couches, Woolf's basket with a tartan cushion, a television, a bookshelf stocked with paperbacks, a few souvenir art books; polished boards, a wooden dining table and four chairs. It looked ordinary and comfortable.

He liked sharing his life with another person whose possessions sometimes made no sense to him: the books she loved, full of words he'd never read; her clothes, he didn't understand why she needed so many when she seemed to wear mostly the same few things all the time. And when, occasionally, he would suggest she put on some particular dress she would equivocate and then say it wasn't appropriate and he'd wonder why she owned it at all. Her souvenirs of home, the foods in bright pop art wrappers, that she bought at a special shop in Amsterdam, that slowly found their way to the back of the cupboard. He liked being a part of this double life. It made him feel more substantial, more stable, that he shared his life with her.

Eliza had been working from home. ‘Have a good day?’ she called as he dropped his things in the hallway. On the coffee table was the ‘I love tits’ mug. She followed his gaze. ‘The others are too small. This way I don’t have to keep making more tea.’ She smiled at him. ‘How did the thing with the journalist go?’

‘I think I should have handed him to Claartje in the beginning. He takes up a lot of time and we’re talking in circles.’

Eliza placed her laptop on top of the pile of papers beside her chair. ‘Just hand him off to her now then.’

‘It’s too complicated now. I’d have to brief her on the whole thing so that we didn’t come across as inconsistent or whatever and it’s just easier if I finish what I started.’

‘I don’t see why Claartje can’t handle it. She’d probably like it.’

Heico sighed heavily. ‘Surely they’ll make a decision soon.’

Eliza stood up and began stacking the paperwork she’d been working on into a pile. ‘Well I guess that’s a day then. Shall we eat out?’

‘We should try the Indonesian on the *Oude Molenweg*.’

‘Perfect,’ said Eliza and she disappeared upstairs.

Heico gathered the mug and glasses from the coffee table and loaded them into the dishwasher together with the plates and cups in the sink.

‘Will we drive?’ called Eliza from upstairs.

‘Do you want to?’

‘I always feel like we’re poor when we show up to a restaurant on bikes.’

‘Fine, we’ll take the car.’

Eliza appeared on the stairs now. ‘Do you think this bag?’

She had changed, put on a little make up and now held a green handbag aloft for his approval.

‘Yes, that one.’ Which is what he would have said regardless of which she’d selected.

Heico peered at himself in the entrance hall mirror. People said he looked like his mother. He frowned. He did not mind the new silvery hairs beginning to appear, but his face seemed to be

softening – like his father's had – and it made him feel like he was leaving something behind.

'Let's go,' said Eliza behind him, and pressed past him to open the door.

Youssef had dried himself but had not dressed before emerging from the bathroom. He stood naked, looking for what to wear. The shock of it made Nadia want to laugh, though she thought this inadvisable. She bit her lip and watched his naked back. Had he planned this, leaving his clothes behind deliberately when he went to shower?

Youssef allowed her to know him in a way that was a shock at first. He was ashamed of very little: his body least of all. He did not hide from her, and his honesty could make her mouth go dry. He had told her about his teenage years and though he was a virtuous man, there had been many temptations. Sometimes when he told her these things she felt frightened and had to hold her body very rigid to keep from shivering, though she could not have said precisely why.

Surely he could feel her watching him. His body was solid, his muscles lightly defined. His dark hair was damp and his shoulders still carried a few drops of water from the shower. It was a strange sensation, watching him move. Something in her felt stung – somehow – by the sight of him. She did not know if this was how she was supposed to feel or whether he had meant for her to watch him, but he seemed oddly unhurried though she was due at her first job in less than half an hour.

She mostly did not mind cleaning. The houses she worked at were full of shiny new things, washable surfaces and clean bold colours with only a layer of dust or a little grime. Defiantly bright despite the chaos and mess that sometimes greeted her on her arrival in homes inhabited by children and busy parents, all of whom seemed to be running late every time she saw them. Things were so young and fresh here. At least in the places that they brought her to clean.

She had told Youssef about the colourful homes. His apartment was grey and white and

chrome. He did not seem to need the bright colours that other homes had.

Nadia had stopped many times at the stall that displayed flowers in buckets in tidy rows in a narrow shop on the ground floor of their building but she had not dared to buy any. Once the florist himself (a large, aproned man who, at home, might have been the butcher) had smiled sympathetically at her, but they had not spoken.

Youssef was sweet, well-educated, and he always smelled clean, like fresh-cut wood, though she did not think he had ever worked with wood. He was not the type of man who had a fondness for fixing things. Their fathers had been friends in some long distant, much simpler time and place, or so her father had told her, and Nadia had had no real hesitation in coming here. But the truth was she had had not a sliver of an idea of what she had been getting herself into.

On the weekend, Heico and Eliza rode their bikes out to the sand dunes that flanked the North Sea coast. The day was cloudy and the wind grabbed at their voices making it hard to talk as they rode. They left their bikes on the edge of the path, Eliza's hair and scarf flapping in the wind.

The site was marked with a stone plaque with a list of names. Eliza made Heico translate the poems and epitaphs for her as she stood, her hands in her hair, looking at the sand in front of them. There was nothing else to see.

It was a haunting thought: those last-minute deaths, just days before liberation, carried out in silence and sand. One by one or in helpless clusters: punishment for resistance. Perhaps they had sensed that the end was near from the desperation of their captors who took this one last chance for vengeance into their own hands. The Germans had left their bodies dumped in shallow graves, brushed with sand and wind. Later they had been gathered into minimally marked sites, granted this at least: a quiet place to spend eternity.

Eliza said she didn't like that they were out there alone. She thought they should be guarded or something.

'From what?'

'For honour.'

Heico didn't know how to respond. 'They're not Jews,' he said and immediately regretted it.

She shook her head, used perhaps to the gulf of misunderstanding that sometimes came between them. 'I guess they are people of all religions and none.'

Her formulation – formal and self-righteous – irritated him, but not more than the echo of his own stupidity. He felt a sense of pride in the Dutch bravery and sacrifice. It wasn't something he had thought about much, but he had come here on a school trip years ago and he resented her appropriated ... grief? That wasn't quite right. He had wanted to share this place with her, as if he personally needed to show her his hands were clean. But that wasn't it either. He felt angry and unable to explain it, even to himself.

He had met Germans whose skin crawled with national guilt, students who knew that their grandfathers had watched as others committed these crimes. They called their grandmothers out for complacent liars; their mouths tasted permanently of something sour that would not wash away.

A muttonbird held its wings outspread and floated overhead. Heico pointed. '*Grauwe pijlstormvogel*,' he said. 'They almost never come in over the land here.' He had seen masses of them once on a trip home to visit his father, their wings beating steadily as if they had not noticed the calm of the afternoon, plunging at regular intervals into the sea. And now, when the wind caught at Eliza's hair and whipped the sand at their ankles, the muttonbird glided, wings outstretched, displaying its silver under-wings.

Eliza glanced up at the bird without interest. She inclined her head towards the railway line and the town beyond. 'How far away would the mosque be?'

Heico pointed. 'You'd be able to see it from here, certainly once they cut those trees down – which they'll have to, to have the space they need.'

Eliza considered this for a moment. 'I guess they'll plant new ones. Still, it *is* close.'

'To the graves? I think it wouldn't bother people if it were built up.'

'Mmm.' Eliza played with the cuff of her jacket. 'Even if there wasn't an issue with the birds, it does seem that planning a building so close to the graves ... I'm surprised it's allowed.'

He turned his body towards the water. 'Shall we walk out to the sea?'

She assented, pulling her coat around her, taking a few uneven steps until she was level with him. 'Thanks, for bringing me here.'

There were camps at Amersfoort, Westerbork, Vught. The same train line Heico used to take

to visit his grandparents had been used to transport Dutch citizens to the camps in Germany, Austria and Poland. Before he'd met Eliza, he had sometimes envied the Germans their clean, stark guilt. The Dutch had muddier sins on their hands.

Here they had had the Occupation and the Hunger Winter, a kind of alternate reality his grandparents spoke about with surprising levity. From their stories, it seemed to Heico that mostly there had been a sense of waiting, but perhaps this was just the perception of someone who came after, who knows those times were temporary: that the war would end and life would go on.

The idea of those executions haunted him: how, in a country so densely packed with people, the occupiers had found a place of white silence and a few tufts of sea-hardy grasses. He could picture them, captors and captives moving as a group, the sand slowing their progress. And later, when the captors returned, perhaps to a seaside hotel they had taken over, ordering the chambermaids to sweep up the small piles of sand on their bedroom floors where they had removed their boots.

Now only a kilometre away there was a restaurant in an old farmhouse where coloured bunting flapped in the breeze. Even then someone had lived in that farmhouse and for all anyone knew, they had never suspected a thing. If the occupiers chose the days when the wind blew out towards the sea, then only the birds would have been witnesses and even they would have been gone long before the men piled a few shovels full of sand over the bodies and left them there, the grasses whipping in the wind.

Heico's own favourite story of bravery from the war was the one about the scientists in charge of the seed library in Amsterdam who chose to starve in the Hunger Winter rather than eat the seeds in their care. He wondered if this meant there was something defective about him – that the thing saved in this story was not a village, not a person, but a catalogue of seeds. Back when they first met, this was the sort of thing he might have told Eliza, but not now. Now all the stories seemed to course with more meaning than he had been conscious of before.

The beach was empty and the sea was grey-green tumbled with foam. They stood at the point where the grasses ended and looked out at the sand and sea in front of them.

'I've been thinking of going home for the holidays,' Eliza said.

Heico glanced across at her and then back towards the gravesite. He felt he had always known Eliza. She fitted with him as if they had been created together. He had been so grateful to find her that somehow, maybe, he had forgotten that she had not always been there and that there was a possible future when he might have to do without her, a possible world in which he had never met her. When, in odd moments, this thought occurred to him it was enough to make him shiver.

Eliza pulled her jacket collar up around her neck. 'It feels so lonely out here.'

They watched a low drift of sand as the wind carried it along the beach.

'We should stop for pancakes on the way back,' he said. And they turned back towards their bikes.

TWO

March 2004

<> The Dutch bishops visit Pope John Paul II. They report falling numbers of Catholics and increasing indifference in believers. They do not discuss gay marriage or euthanasia. <> Terrorist attacks on Madrid's Atocha station claim 191 lives. <> Princess Juliana – mother of the queen and immediate past monarch – dies at age ninety-four. At her request a female vicar from outside of the Dutch Reformed Church oversees her funeral. <>

O mountains and birds, repeat with him My praises!

Qur'an, 34:10

The birds continued to come and we continued to pray on the Friday afternoon crèche carpets. As our boys grew they joined us up the front while the girls clung to their mother's skirts behind us.

Some said that we had the sort of faith that Europe had forgotten how to hold: uncomplicated acceptance of a revealed truth. In our home lands most of us had not asked ourselves the questions that had led Europe in its slow turn away from God; and if these questions had begun to occur to us, rarely did we ask them of our imams now. The question we did begin to ask was: how are we to swim in this new water, now that we have made it our home?

We watched our young people test the edges of this new world. Our sisters shopped for clothing in brighter colours; our brothers took jobs in sport, music and television, where our values seemed distant, but perhaps still shimmered on the edges of their consciousness, though they could not always join us for prayer on Friday afternoons.

Some of our younger brothers took two buses to attend youth activities at *El-Tawheed* in Amsterdam Oud-West. A few parents in our community worried that some there were not good influences: there were men there who wanted to convince our boys to return 'home,' to fight, they said and a couple of the boys from *El-Tawheed* had been arrested for throwing rocks at two men holding hands in the street. These matters gave us pause. We had tried, in years past, to plan youth trips and summer programs but without a centre to call our own, our community proved too nebulous to support such activities and they faltered for lack of attendance. So our boys had nowhere else to go.

For many of us ‘home’ meant more than one place and there was a guardedness between us because our lives reached out further from this community than they would have if we lived the local lives many of our fathers and grandfathers had. But we had faith that if we could build the mosque, our brothers and sisters would return to us. Our community, filtering osmotically into the cities and towns around us, would be drawn together by a building that would centre and join us to one another once again. Our community would be composed of many – young and old, male and female, traditional and progressive; we would speak to our contemporaries, we would have a centre and an authority from which to speak and our voices would be heard.

On the streets and in their workplaces, our sisters covered their hair in headscarves and met the curious stares of our neighbours – even if they were born here – while we, their brothers, often slipped through the crowd unseen. Sometimes we envied the women their visible fidelity, this small gesture to set themselves apart – a way to take one small step back from all around us in this still new and foreign land.

We watched our sisters change here. It was not always easy. For them. For us. Our daughters pushed against the rules of their fathers, the inequities with their brothers. Here they could, and must, lead public lives. They were not silent. And when we watched them move through the world, we sometimes thought, perhaps it is they who will show us the way to truly live here.

The first peewit's egg had been found in Friesland; crocuses and clusters of snowbells had appeared where the snow had recently piled up around tree trunks. The tallest grasses were slender with a firework-burst of seed husks at the top that darted left and right in the breeze and the timothy grass bowed and straightened in an uneven Mexican wave. Here and there buttercups punctuated the green with their metallic yellow and above, a group of jaegers floated on the breeze, their dark wings stretched wide, an echoing splash of yellow on their white underbellies.

Heico and Eliza rode their bikes through the flower fields, the air sweet and unrelenting. They stopped for coffee in a cafe of dark wooden panelling hung with pictures of windmills in faded watercolour. They ordered apple pie and the waiter served it cold with a rosette of sweetened cream.

On the canals the wild ducks paraded by: the males with patches of green and purple-blue as bright as Easter egg foil, the females demure in browns with a splash of that same blue on their wings. A coot with a bent stick in its beak paddled under a bridge, heading back towards the nest. There were birds of prey too – falcons and goshawks. And an occasional swallow swooped in leisurely circles, against a sky full of fragmented clouds, heralding the warmer weather to come.

Heico pushed his supermarket trolley past the display of Easter eggs. The rhythm of the trolley's uneven wheels triggered a favoured chant of Father Sherwin's: *An Easter egg as big as your head*. Father gave Easter eggs to all the altar boys, not just his favourites, and he always bought the biggest ones he could find. He would smile his watery smile, his skin pink and soft, too soft to be a man's. A musky, oriental scent clung to him reminding Heico of incense, except saltier somehow.

Logan complained that his dad made him share his Easter egg with his sisters but Heico never ate his. His mother, unsure of what to make of his uncharacteristic reticence, would give it to the kids next door who would make a ruckus about smashing it ceremonially in the driveway and that, at least, Heico could appreciate, listening from the other side of the fence. The moment of destruction followed by plunder. He wished he had siblings – a tribe of co-conspirators to fight over a chocolate egg with.

And now decades later, pushing a trolley through the supermarket, the chant repeated itself: *An Easter egg as big as your head.* And there was nothing he could do to get rid of it.

Heico's team liked spring. People noticed birds in spring. The education team ran projects for children and volunteers took them in small, over-excited groups to visit bird hides in the polder.

The city council hired falconers whose raptors chased birds away from the airport; and local farmers used them to keep nuisance birds from their crops. An elegant, harmless solution that still somehow bothered Heico, somewhere at the back of his mind.

Heico had decided to keep an informal survey of the birds he saw at the mosque site. It would only take a few hours a month and he could do it himself. Some basic information from the specific area they were discussing – some concrete facts for people to work with.

Today he'd brought the truck and parked it a little way up the road so as not disturb anything that might be in the grasses on the periphery or on the stretch of water that ran beside the road. As he arrived he saw there was a nest on the edge of the water. Two coots took it in turns to dip their white beaks and heads underwater, their black bodies following, then rising again like corks to the surface. The coot young, brown and downy with little red heads, stayed close to the edge watched closely by the adults. They gave a high-pitched wheeze like a child's squeeze toy.

Eliza didn't want to visit his mother for Easter. 'You know what Easter's about, right?' she'd said.

'It's important to her.'

'So you go. I'm sure she'll understand.'

Heico wasn't so sure. Flemish jays could recall up to ten thousand places that they had hidden their acorns. His mother had such a memory for a lifetime of slights and petty injustices. Heico sighed. 'It's ridiculous for you to sit at home when Mum's making a big lunch and…'

'Why don't you think she can understand that Easter is not something your Jewish wife would be interested in celebrating? It's a glorification of misplaced scapegoating and violence.'

There was a time when Heico might have agreed with this. Church had seemed to young Heico a strange and dark place. All those saints and martyrs depicted on the walls – their deaths colourfully and unstintingly evoked in the books on his childhood shelf:

eaten by lions,

stoned,

crucified in various unlikely positions,

roasted on a spit,

plunged into the ocean,

beheaded,

trampled by horses, wild cows,

impaled,

burned,

clubbed,

hanged,

skinned alive,

arrows,

swords.

There was no end of gloriously fascinating deaths.

But Easter wasn't about death. It was about Spring. The unexpected newness of everything, every year again.

There was a confusion of sedge warblers with a nest in the reeds, though he could not see it from where he stood. He had seen one, golden and black with markings as if he had been designed as an art deco ornament – tiny, delicate – hopping gingerly between the reeds, correcting as they bent under his weight. Were there young in the nest?

Heico pulled on a pair of waterproof pants and waded in through the reeds a little way up from where he thought the nest was and then doubled back slowly. Yes, a nest, at the point that the reeds were densest, perched on the undergrowth there. It contained two young, unperturbed at his

careful approach. The adult warbler watched him carefully, so that he thought it best to pull back and return to the bank the way he had come.

Now he was in the water, he saw that another coot had built its nest tucked back into the bank on the other side. Two more coots with at least one young. If the survey was an official one he would have to check for certain how many young there were, but he thought it best not to disturb the nests unnecessarily. He noted the warblers and corrected the tally of Eurasian coots.

In his childhood Lent had been as much a part of the year as Easter itself. The forty days of storing up lollies in a jar kept at the end of the bed; the sickish feeling of Easter Sunday morning. But when they'd first moved to Holland, Easter was nothing like it had been at home. Here the kids searched for real eggs and ate them, boiled, for lunch. By that time he was almost too old for Easter hunts anyway, but this fact had affronted him as if it represented everything that was strange here – everything was blander and more disappointing.

This block had seen more traffic in recent months. The ground was bare in patches and the grasses trampled. Over the back, the adjacent land was dark green, brushed in wide swatches of wildflowers and coloured grasses, purple and maroon. Two Greylag geese with their young glided by. Heico watched as the family clambered up the bank, the juveniles stretching their insubstantial wings in imitation of their parents. The young began plucking urgently at the grasses for food while the adult geese stood by, unconcerned. These days most stayed the whole year here – feeling at home on the edge of the continent and disinclined to migrate now the winters here were more temperate.

Four common moorhens flew low over the water beating the surface with each stroke of their wings. A territory dispute. A little later only one pair remained. They circled, making small kik, kik noises as their fluffy black young remained silent, paddling close to the edge, concealed amongst the reeds.

It occurred to Heico that he was now older than Jesus had ever been. Such a strange thought. He had heard His story so many times as a boy and a teenager; but always Jesus had been an adult – filled with experience and wisdom as unfathomable as his parents', and now – suddenly – Heico had already out-lived the central hero of his childhood.

The recent warmer weather had brought out the horned grebe's mating plumage, colourful and strange: the gold behind its eyes contrasting with its flat black head, the soft russet of its flanks and neck, darker back and bright white belly. It let out a loud, nasal 'aarh' ending with a trill that carried across the water. Heico waded into the water and the bird raised his wings and flew up out towards the trees on the opposite side.

Spring was a very good time to begin, Heico reflected. He was only just getting started.

Youssef dropped Nadia off at the Brandsma's house every Tuesday. It was no larger than the others Nadia cleaned, its contents no grander, but this was the house of the man who worked with the birds. Most times she tried to forget the fact as she cleaned. They were paying her and she needed the job. But here lived the man in whose power it was to walk away, and all the waiting and petitioning the council that the elders were always doing could come to an end, and the mosque could finally be built. If Nadia hadn't needed the job perhaps she would have given this house to someone else to clean but several of her other clients had cut down to just one clean per month.

She had never met Mr Brandsma, only ever dealt with his wife, Eliza, who was often in a rush and could sometimes be abrupt with her. Their common language was Dutch, which neither of them spoke well, so they said very little to one another. The dog, at least, was friendly. Docile. She looked forward to seeing their dog.

Mr Brandsma's bookshelves did not hold taxidermied birds – as one of the larger houses she cleaned did. He had a couple of books about birds, but this was not unusual – people here loved birds, she knew: their only contact with wild animals. Many kept binoculars, gathering dust, on top of bookshelves crammed with tired travel guides and folios of road maps that had turned white at the folds.

There was a world map pinned to the wall in the room with the desk and the guest bed that they never seemed to use. Nadia found Morocco and with her finger. She traced a line up to Amsterdam in a slow curve. Somehow this was reassuring. It was not so far, really. A few hours on a plane and she'd be home. If Morocco was still her home; she wasn't sure.

On the weekend, she and Youssef had been to visit his family in a neighbourhood where

everyone seemed to be connected to the television and radio stations from home. Things were different there. In the streets there were people who looked like them. The shops sold food from home, and she could understand much of what people around her said.

At home she had existed in a network of relationships. There it had been clear how she fit into a complex and wide-reaching family that had existed before her arrival and would persist – ever-evolving – long after she was dead. Here everything seemed looser. Her husband was absent for long hours. Her family-in-law, though kind, lived some distance away and expected very little of her, and Youssef expected little of them. He acted impatient in their company, like a child. Sometimes he defied his parents' wishes or pretended not to understand them and in those moments she realised that in many ways she barely knew her husband.

'Why don't we stay here, in your family's house?' she asked her husband when they got in the car to go home.

Youssef's eyes bugged. 'Here?' He must have seen her face because he reached across and touched her hand. 'Please don't mention this idea to my mother.'

He did not require all the things of her that she had expected. He was grateful for simplicity and quiet and did not express preferences about what food she might serve. He did not like for her to get up after the meal to wash the dishes, preferring her to sit with him, leaving the leftovers to congeal on the plates until morning.

The mornings, once Youssef had left the house, were long and empty. The floor creaked when she moved between the rooms, until everything was in its place. The afternoons could be filled more easily with errands and food preparation.

She was grateful for the regular prayer times that gave the day shape and substance, that meant she had to rise from the quietness, roll out her prayer mat and pray. She could not hear a call to prayer, but Youssef had printed out a table showing the times for each prayer, shifting rapidly now as the days lengthened. *Fajr*: the early rising as the sky lightens (quiet here, at home a time to feel the community of others all around), *Dhuhr*: the midday pause to turn to God, *Asr*: when the sun lengthens the shadows, *Maghrib*: when the sun has left the sky, and *Isha*: when the last light has

slipped from the sky, when the only light was street lamps and headlights and the greenhouses on the horizon.

When she was alone the prayers echoed thinly in the room. The windows and walls were too far from each other – the rooms too sparsely decorated and from her prayer mat, the furniture was oversized and menacing: a coffee table, glassy and hungry; the couch, too deep, too low, too wide. Perhaps she was the only one in the building who had stopped what she was doing to kneel and pray, while others continued sleeping or eating or screaming at each other on the floors above and below.

When Nadia thinks of Youssef through the day, she pictures him standing silhouetted in the doorway, about to leave. She feels like this is how she sees him most, though this is not of course true. She sees him asleep, her stomach knotted with something that she hasn't yet worked out how to voice; or in the mornings, his face absent as he eats bread with cheese or thin slices of meat, his mind racing ahead of him. In the evenings she strokes the arm of the chair as he talked. She has a patience for his narrative that he takes for granted; his mother paid his father this same service. She likes it when he is home with her but the evenings are always too short to hold weight against the vast, empty day.

Heico arrived early at the council office and sat on one of the moulded plastic chairs waiting for his appointment. Peter appeared on the edge of the waiting area in trousers too tight around the waist and glanced around the seating area with shallow eyes. ‘Mr Brandsma?’

Heico followed him to a glassy meeting room.

‘Peter van der Veld,’ he introduced himself and shook Heico’s hand in the doorway.

‘We’ve met,’ said Heico.

‘They’re painting my office so I’m in here today.’ Peter gestured for Heico to sit at the meeting table and seated himself behind his papers at its head. He drew a deep breath as if to indicate that he had not been looking forward to this meeting but now there was nothing for it but to push ahead. ‘We appreciate the work you’re doing with the sea birds and everything,’ he said.

Heico nodded. ‘Thank you, we’re lucky to have the sanctuary here.’

Peter managed a plaster-faced smile. ‘What we don’t appreciate is you going to the newspapers with this.’ He opened a full-page newspaper clipping from his pile and placed it in front of Heico.

Heico picked up the page. It was taken from the local newspaper dated just over a week ago. He hadn’t seen the article before, but it had Juliaan’s byline.

‘I didn’t go to the newspaper, the newspaper came to me.’

The map of the bird migration they had given Juliaan, when he first called, took up half the page. Though it was somewhat obscured in the resizing, the migration path along the coast via the protected dune area up towards the Wadden Islands in the North was clearly visible.

'The mosque is a sensitive project. If this,' Peter jabbed a finger at the image in the newspaper, 'is a serious submission, then it will be dealt with seriously. If not, can I please request you stop talking to the newspapers.'

'I haven't "submitted" anything: not to the council and not to the newspaper. They called me.'

'Well, of course they did!'

'Then no, I can't stop talking to them. It's part of our brief to respond to public enquiries and, frankly, I would have thought I was serving your interests too.'

Peter puffed out his cheeks impatiently. 'In that case, shall we say we are looking for a formal submission from you by close of business next Friday. Otherwise we'll be forced to proceed without regard to your concerns.'

'Are you threatening me?'

'I'm asking you to play by the same rules everyone else has to play by. I'm sure you appreciate that we need to document any and all objections to the planning application.'

'Sure, but I hardly think –.'

Peter stood up. 'The best meeting's a short meeting, they say. Thank you for your time. No doubt we'll be hearing from you.' Peter shepherded him out with the wave of his hand. 'I look forward to receiving your submission.'

Smug bastard, thought Heico. As soon as he stepped out of the building he pulled out his phone to see if he had the journalist's number saved.

'I think it's my turn to buy you a drink,' said Heico when Juliaan answered.

Juliaan had suggested a different place to meet, closer to his office and Heico set out early to be sure not to keep him waiting. On the way an antique toy store caught his eye and he stopped to look in the window: children's toys and piles of old books, a wooden carousel with horses painted in faded golds, pinks and greens, a tin milk truck, a cluster of dolls peered out of a wooden pram. In the corner, perched on a pile of hardcover books was a snow-globe with, as its central scene, an intricate Dutch townscape in miniature: church, town hall, windmill and two small houses. In the foreground a pair of

tiny ice-skaters in old-fashioned outfits posed as if for an Avercamp painting.

'A gift?' asked the storeowner when Heico went in to enquire.

'I don't know,' Heico said. 'Maybe for my wife.' A piece of Holland in miniature. He could save it to give it to her as a naturalisation gift, when she became a Dutch citizen.

'It's an unusual piece,' said the man. He reached down into the display and picked it up. He twisted and dipped the globe before righting it and placing it on the counter. Down around the little village wide white and grey v-shapes swooped and swirled through the liquid. 'Birds,' the man said.

Heico crouched so the globe was at eye level and watched them descend. 'I'll take it,' he said when he straightened.

Heico was already at the bar when Juliaan arrived, flustered and put out. He looked at Heico quizzically but joined him at his table and accepted a beer.

'I wanted to talk to you about sound pollution,' said Heico. 'I don't think we've really covered that.'

'OK.' Juliaan pulled out his note taker and clicked it on, nodding for Heico to continue.

'Birds are sensitive to urban noise levels. Our colleagues in Berlin have found that urban nightingales sing louder on weekdays during rush hour than at the same time of day on the weekend. Some bird species can no longer hear each other at all in the urban setting, which affects mating patterns…' Heico lifted his glass but did not drink. 'Now I'm thinking of it, some birds even navigate using sound – they use echoes to avoid colliding with objects. Others use sound to locate prey. Changes in sound levels are a serious matter if you are a bird.' He drank, as if satisfied he had done his duty with regards to conveying this information.

He could feel Juliaan looking at him as if he believed that Heico held the answer to some mystery that Juliaan himself couldn't seem to unlock.

'OK,' Juliaan said. He reached out to pick up his note taker. 'Is that all?'

Heico glanced at their almost-full beers. He reached for a menu card lying on the next table.

'I'm going to get something to eat,' said Heico. 'Do you want anything?'

Juliaan looked at Heico warily. He glanced at his watch. 'I'll have a ham and cheese *tosti*.'

'Alright,' said Heico when he came back from placing their order. 'You're the expert on all things religious. Tell me: how has evolutionary theory not killed religion altogether?'

Juliaan grimaced. 'God's not incompatible with evolution.'

'But evolution does seem rather to step on His toes, don't you think?'

Juliaan sighed, perhaps reluctant to get into this line of conversation: 'Well, I'm not sure. What's the evolutionary function of, say, Mozart's violin concertos?'

'You don't believe in evolution?'

'Of course I do. I just don't think evolution alone can explain the whole array of things that exist in the world.'

Heico smiled a lopsided smile. 'A violin concerto doesn't have to have a function. It's just that if it doesn't, over time it will disappear. But perhaps the arts are cultural artefacts that reinforce human social order.'

'The same could be said of religion.'

'No doubt.'

'But there are other social animals on the planet and as far as we know, dolphins don't have choral ensembles and meerkats don't perform dance routines.'

'They also don't baptise their young or sit Shiva.'

'I thought crows …'

'Well arguably some crows do seem to observe some type of communal death rite. But with art – and religion – you're talking about the large human brain,' Heico said. 'I'm not an evolutionary biologist but –'

'I'm not saying we need a God to explain music, just that it looks like humans are a kind of special case. We're not the same as a sea mollusc or even a great ape.'

'No, of course we're not, but that doesn't mean that we have no responsibility to –'

'I'm not saying no responsibility, I'm just saying that in the scheme of things –'

'A mosque ranks higher than a nest?'

The waiter set down two toasted sandwiches and hurried away.

Juliaan drew the closest plate towards him and cut his sandwich into four tidy triangles then looked up and met Heico's dour expression with a smile. 'Maybe, it's more that humans have good reason to worship a God, even if He is merely the product of our over-evolved brains, and possibility that's for more or less the same reason that Mozart wrote his concertos, and Mulisch wrote *Ontdekking van de Hemel*. An awareness of the immanent, or the transcendent, maybe.' He thought for a moment. 'My suspicion is that the human need for God may be negated by a full engagement with the arts. But that's luxury most of the world can't afford.'

'Doesn't that skate over most of the history of Western art? Eastern too, probably.'

'Well that might be a matter of economics, I guess. When the Church drops away as a patron, the arts turn away from depicting God and his pals.'

Heico thought about this. 'Or maybe God's just hard to depict.'

'Or maybe the Muslims have it right, and God doesn't want to be depicted.'

'So God is absent in art because it would be hubris to try–?'

'You don't think there's an artist with enough hubris to try? No, I'm saying maybe God chooses to be absent in art. Unrepresentable.' Juliaan raised his glass, as if toasting this idea.

'Aesthetic theology aside, if we decide that every mosque beats every nest in a human-moderated game of rock, paper, scissors, in the end we'll get what we deserve: no birds, no trees, no planet.'

Juliaan's mouth was full but he shook his head.

'OK, for the sake of the argument, say there is no God. Who do you think wins the mosque/birds game then?'

Juliaan swallowed and brushed his napkin past his lips. 'I think it's a tie.'

'How can that be? If there's no God – how can the mosque be in the running?'

'Because there are humans.'

'It's like you want to humour humans until their habitat disappears.'

'It's not like that at all. It's about symbols. The mosque is a symbol: religious, political,

human.'

'And the birds are not *symbol* enough to keep their habitat?'

'They have a whole pile of habitat on the other side of the train line. I just don't think they are that fussy.'

Heico's eyebrows shot up. 'So now the hoopoe are some *prima donna* species who can't be satisfied with a few stumpy trees in the sand dunes?'

'I'm not blaming the birds!'

'You think the approval delays are *my* fault?'

Juliaan sighed and shook his head. 'They're probably mine.'

Heico glanced at the window. Rain was streaming down obscuring the view.

'Do you need a lift?' Juliaan asked.

'No,' said Heico. 'I'll just wait. I have a report I need to write, and this.' He indicated his satchel, which held a handful of spiral–bound reports. They seemed to multiply and gather and never truly recede again. There was a great mountain of unread reports and indexes, budgets and memos accumulating and moving slowly, like shifting dunes across his desk, circulated among colleagues and then returning to clamour together on the lower reaches of his bookshelf or finally relegated to vertical files or archival boxes stacked beside the filing cabinet. He pulled two of the reports from his satchel and placed them on the table beside him.

'Well,' said Juliaan. 'Thanks, for lunch.' He gathered his things slowly as if he expected Heico to say something more.

'Get what you needed?' Heico nodded at the voice recorder in Juliaan's hand.

'Sure,' said Juliaan and he paused a moment longer before heading for the door.

There was an image of the design for the new mosque on the front of the newsletter that Youssef had brought up with the mail. Its many circles joined together to form larger circles: archways and the central dome. She thought of the mosque in her hometown. She remembered the sudden shade from the heat of the afternoon. The breath and rustle of the women together; shoulder to shoulder, their bodies moving together. Beneath her feet the comfort of thick carpets: luxurious and unnoticed. The swish of cloth, the cool stone air, the murmured words of the *Salat* between them like a ripple through water: swaying, moving their bodies in time. The voices echoed above and around them. The air between them seemed viscous and she imagined herself floating up through it, tumbling, weightless through light and sound. The women around her: she knew them all, and they knew her; they had known her since her childhood and now, as a young woman, she knew the stories of their marriages, their children, their challenges and sorrows; their pride and their regrets.

Here she attended language classes held at the local school on weekday afternoons. There were also classes on how to take a bus, talk to strangers and weigh the fruit at the supermarket. It seemed to Nadia that it was a very strange world when one had to learn to weigh fruit and count bus zones and sing children's songs in order to be allowed to live in the country in which one's husband was born.

The teachers sometimes spoke about the hijab. They explained that some people felt they created a separation between people. But the trouble with headscarves seemed strange to Nadia: here the politicians worried about what it was Islamic women were hiding, but in Nadia's experience Muslim women hid very little. Their stories were shared stories – in communities like the one she had grown up in, there had been nowhere to hide. It was here that she had a whole life separate from that

of other women. Her home, far from theirs. Here they lived in boxes – separate but stacked tall and in each box was another marriage, completely unknown to those in all the others.

In the films she had seen – as a child, and now, occasionally, on Youssef's television set – it seemed that veiled women intrigued people: they found them mysterious and exotic. The films gloried in secrets held behind wooden latticework, face veils, lowered eyes, women's bodies kept from men and then – sometimes – suddenly, inexplicably, offered to them for no more compensation than a few moments of muted pleasure.

In the films, here, it was like every day was *rokjesdag*. The Dutch teacher had told them about this with an ironic smile: the first Spring day when the girls all decided – as if a memo had been sent around – to wear skirts again. Nadia wondered if Youssef knew about *rokjesdag*, and if he noticed it when it happened, but so far she had not dared to ask him.

On Thursdays Nadia and four other women – all in headscarves and long, inconvenient skirts – circled wide paths around the school car park to learn to stay upright on a bike. They had scratches on their hands and bruises on their knees, but the instructor – a humourless woman with very little apparent interest in being there – demanded they right the bicycles and try again.

'I can drive an automobile,' one of the women told her, dusting grazed palms on her clothes.

The instructor shook her head as if this was an admission of something much worse than irrelevant but that she was willing to pretend she hadn't heard it. She pointed to the bike. 'Today we are cycling,' the instructor said and she turned to watch Fatima careen past, tilted precariously to the left, a look of horrified concentration on her usually serene face.

Nadia liked the feel of the Dutch words. It seemed like a secret code for a complex game they expected her to play here. It wasn't just the language but the way they wanted her to move through the world, interact with others and understand things that never quite got said. She liked the way the words here could be linked together like a child's train set: adjectives and nouns, a game that she and her classmates found amusing, challenging each other to increased ridiculousness in their

combinations while the teacher looked on, bemused by their amusement at the tools and toys of her native language.

She was a good teacher, Nadia thought, aloof but not distant. She wanted them to learn but she allowed them to play with the words. She smiled at their clumsy clutching at language, their attempts to communicate between themselves in it, their reaching for simple jokes – callbacks and recurring themes. She smiled at them like they were her children, but she did not involve herself and never joined them for lunch afterwards when they gathered in the cafeteria struggling against the language barriers between them – speaking in snatches of Dutch, French, English, Arabic and Berber.

And then there were other lessons that they asked her to attend, in a classroom, the dark windows decorated with children's paintings and slung with paper chains. These classes were for women only. The instructors spoke of things that the women should not tolerate. Slavery, they said. Violence. Over-work. Forced pregnancies. Nadia lowered her eyes in shame, though she did not know why she felt it. The words were ugly, scarring, gaping wounds. The idea that she herself might be oppressed seemed absurd. She was not beaten, she was not forbidden to socialise with her neighbours. The instructors encouraged them to learn the language, drive a car, to get to know the streets and stores and trains and buses, to know how they might leave if it became necessary: if her husband hurt her, if she was uncomfortable, if she became afraid. *Afraid of what?* she asked herself, but she did not ask it aloud. She did not want to hear their answer.

You do not need to mention these discussions to your husbands, the instructors said, but you need to know that if you need it, there is help. The instructors wore headscarves but they spoke Arabic haltingly. These women were Dutch. They were remade. In one generation they had become another sort of person and their betrayal of where they had come from was ugly and their words echoed in a dark corner of her mind for days afterwards.

One evening her class had run later than usual but Youssef was not waiting outside to pick her up. She stood on the street, still waiting, after all the others had left. The streetlamps dispelled the night in

bright patches that overlapped in orange circles along the street.

When he arrived he seemed weary and impatient. ‘What do they even teach you at those things?’ he said.

‘They teach us what Dutch people think.’

‘Like what?’

‘Dutch people like to be on time; gardens should have flowers, not just vegetables; guests should always bring a gift for the host; they hang signs in their front windows when a new baby arrives.’

He laughed. ‘Really?’

‘Sometimes there are even – how do you call that bird? Storks!’

‘No, not about the signs, about all the information about the Dutch.’

Nadia began listing items on her fingers. ‘Dutch people like to drink coffee with a cookie on the side. Dutch people shake hands, men with women, women with men. Friends and family kiss three times, only men do not do this with men. Dutch people ride bikes, decorate their houses at Christmastime, tell their neighbours when they are going on holidays. They taught us a song by Marco Borsato. One of the women said she had seen him on television and she thought he was very handsome.’

Youssef laughed.

‘Last week they showed us a video of how to make *stamppot* with carrots and onions and potatoes and I thought: if we didn’t have the sausage ... or perhaps one with beef.’

‘You want to eat *stamppot*? Even Dutch people don’t eat that. They eat pizza and stir-fry and pasta in salads. They eat bread and cheese, and bread and meat, and bread with chocolate sprinkles.’

‘Hagelslag!’

‘Tax payers’ money well spent I see. You can’t tell time in Dutch but you know about *hagelslag*.’

‘Sometimes I don’t understand you. Not the words, but the way you mean them.’

‘So they haven’t taught you: “Dutch people are sarcastic”?’

Nadia frowned. She felt injured though she did not know how or why. ‘Are you “Dutch people” then?’

He looked at her and then back at the road. She could not read his expression. ‘Some of the time,’ he said.

Heico scrolled down the unopened items in his inbox and, seeing a familiar name from his graduate school days, he opened the email from him.

I wondered if this was you, stirring up trouble? Hope you and the wife are well.

Heico scanned the attached article that his friend had seen in the Saturday newspaper on the other side of the country, about the mosque development and the birds. Its facts were asserted without attribution of action or opinion. It was like seeing a photograph of a photograph of a photograph of oneself.

Yes, our office is involved in this. Lots of bang and clatter, but very little action from the council or anyone I'm afraid. Trying to keep the pressure on. Our feathered friends are always the easiest to ignore.

The reply pinged back a few minutes later:

Someone said to me just last week, 'If they don't come here they go somewhere else, right?'

Heico replied:

About birds or Muslims?

His friend returned with:

The Purple Heron. Damn wind energy people ...

The wind energy lobby were trying to use their 'green' rhetoric to beat them at their own game: 'But it's renewable energy!' they'd say. In one province they had begun visiting local schools preaching their clean, costless energy message. 'Energy straight from God,' Heico had heard they'd told the 'Green Church' group at a diocesan meeting. The birds couldn't compete.

Thanks for the article. Keep up the good fight, wrote Heico.

You too, his friend replied.

April 2004

<> Prince Friso removes himself from the line of succession by marrying fiancée Mabel Wisse Smit who has previously lied in court about her connection to organised crime. Their wedding is public, but sober in nature. <> For Queen's Day the royal family visit Groningen. Argentine-born Crown Princess Maxima steals the show. <> Prime minister Balkenende declares that if the law can't forbid books found in the *El-Tawheed* mosque supporting violence against women, death to homosexuals and female circumcision, then the law needs to be changed. <> Belgian political party *het Vlaams Blok* is found to be in violation of the anti-racism act. <>

Seest thou not that it is Allah whose praises all beings in the heavens and on earth do celebrate, and the birds of the air with wings outspread? Each one knows its own mode of prayer and praise. And Allah knows well all that they do.

Qur'an 24:41

If we were to believe the local papers, it wasn't that the local community objected to having a mosque in the neighbourhood – it was the welfare of the birds that concerned them. They had data from environmental groups who could back them up with computer images and birds that wore radio tags.

Their story was muddled in the beginning, though it solidified as time went on. Images showed the birds travelling along a defined 'migration corridor' that followed the contours of the coast – north-bound in spring, south-bound in the autumn.

We discussed the facts after Friday prayer. Some among us thought that it was auspicious that the birds would come to visit us there, and welcomed the thought that they would return each year as the seasons changed and the years went by. It seemed apt somehow. Do not the wild geese fly across the sky only to please Allah? We asked one another. We smiled and made jokes, about birds and about those who regulated the skylines as if it were still Van Der Heyden's Holland. We did not know what else to do.

Around us there were disputes about headscarves in health care and education – and our sisters, working in these fields, capitulated or did not according to their consciences and the directives of their faith; but as we began to remove the outward signs of our religion, the country could begin to forget that we were here at all.

'What for, such a mosque?' one politician said. 'If I've seen one Muslim in the last week it

would have been a lot.'

No one spoke to him of his blindness – but it was the same people who had wanted the headscarves gone that did not see the need for mosques, public prayer spaces in hospitals and shopping centres, Islamic schools and gender-separated swimming classes.

And the voices who were for us said: Islam must become a European religion – which seemed a strange but convenient claim. And those against us spoke of a violence that few of us had ever known, of traffic congestion and – more unlikely than all the rest – of a low sky filled with birds.

And meanwhile their own spires obstructed the birds, as they had for hundreds of years, though few believers still congregated beneath them. And the churches emptied, closed and were converted into bespoke apartments, avant-garde concert spaces and empty shells too expensive to renovate, too much a part of the Dutch sense of their world to pull down. The cities and towns they had known since childhood, clustered around churches because these were once the centres of the community and the pillars of everyone's lives.

Through the windshield, Heico watched a lapwing chase a crow across the road, the smaller bird tilting acrobatically in flight – warding off the larger intruder with its agile manoeuvres. In childhood the seasons had seemed gradual to Heico, but now there was a violence to their appearance, and none more so than spring which had a way of transforming the world overnight. Though the coolness took a while to tip towards the warmer, longer days, the sudden green of spring always took him by surprise.

Outside the council offices, a group of protesters stood behind cardboard placards. Some leaned against the building, others appeared to be distracted by the contents of a few plastic crates they had brought with them. Their presence was unsettling.

Their banners bore silhouettes of swallows in flight but two of the men wore t-shirts with the Belgian *Vlaams Blok* logo. Still he nodded at them as he entered, trying not to catch anyone's eye.

'Morning,' said someone.

He nodded again, and thought of Volkert van der G setting beef cattle free and shooting Pim Fortuyn in the parking lot of the Hilversum Media Park. Animals and politics were an uneasy combination, perhaps especially since Fortuyn's death.

The Mayor entered the room late and stood for a moment in the doorway as if having arrived without knowing how he got here. The meeting began with a discussion of minor traffic issues before it turned to the birds. Someone raised the matter of one or two homeowners who seemed to be encouraging the birds to frequent the adjacent blocks by spreading feed in the grasses overnight.

There was something in the triviality of this that made Heico feel emptied out. 'I don't see what we can do about private citizens choosing to feed the birds.'

The imam held up his hand. ‘There are people outside this building right now,’ he said. ‘We all saw them as we came in. Many of them say they are concerned for the birds. If people are feeding them—’

‘I don’t speak for the protesters, and I have never tried.’ said Heico.

‘I think you’ll find,’ said the imam, ‘that they believe you speak on their behalf here today.’

‘I resent the implication that—’

‘You can resent it all you want,’ said the Mayor. ‘The fact remains that many of those who speak against the mosque have attached themselves to the cause of the migratory birds, Mr Brandsma. Birds, I might note, that are no more at home here than Islam is.’

There was some shuffling of bodies at this and the imam cleared his throat but when they looked to him to speak, he lowered his eyes to where his hands rested on the table and said nothing. Heico thought of the parish priest of his childhood, his hands: soft and pale as sea molluscs. The sweet smell of talcum powder. *Wait just one moment, boys*. A little pocket money at Christmas. *Our little secret, no need to tell your mothers*.

Heico paused to gather his thoughts. ‘Birds can’t pick and choose which country to call home.’ This comment occasioned more discontented murmurs from the end of the table but the Mayor held his hand up to silence these. ‘Only certain places will do. Many species are very faithful to their summer and winter sites.’

The imam looked up slowly. ‘You are saying we are not loyal to Holland?’ he asked, with a feigned curiosity that seemed to Heico dignified, like a character in a children’s story – a tree or a rock-spirit, with all the wisdom of a timeless thing.

Heico hadn’t meant to say anything of the sort. ‘I only meant to say that though they are migratory, for many this is their true home, or one of them. There have been many generations –,’

‘Again, sir, I must point out that many of our fathers were migrant workers. It’s not as though –,’

‘This is not about whether or not–,’ Heico broke off.

‘I beg you, Mr Brandsma,’ said the Mayor, ‘can you please clarify what this *is* about. We

have sandwiches coming.'

A few people tittered at this, but the Mayor did not appear to have meant it as a joke. Indeed Peter stood up from his place and went to the door to see if he couldn't hurry the lunch trolley.

'It's about space,' said Heico. 'This discussion is about who or what is entitled to that space. Where the greater need –'

'Well, yes,' said the Mayor. 'We are going to have to move this discussion along.'

'There is space for a mosque and community centre, but this space,' Heico pointed to the plans displayed on the board, 'is already accounted for.' He sat down, and at that moment the lunch trolley was brought in.

'Right,' said Peter. 'Let's take a moment to eat and have some coffee.'

Heico sat in his place as plates and coffee cups clinked around him. He felt tired. He stared at the briefing document in front of him, until the font blurred. A cup and saucer clanked at his elbow.

'Coffee?'

Heico looked up. The imam pointed at the cup he had set down beside Heico, a sachet of sugar and one of powdered creamer on the saucer beside it. Heico touched the table to the right of him and the imam sat down.

'We can accommodate the birds,' said the imam. 'We can ask the architects to alter the design if necessary. We'd be happy to have your advice.'

Heico shook his head. 'Just the presence of such a building and the volume of traffic through the area ...'

The imam nodded. 'We can't move on this,' he said. 'The location: we would have to start all over again – another five, perhaps ten years, another city paper, another community group, another city council, another drainage issue, another campaign by those who would prefer to muddle the issues than to talk about them.'

'The things I have said, they haven't been about keeping you out, they've been about allowing the birds that already use that area to continue to return.'

'There is a saying, I think,' said the imam. '"Live and let live"?'

Heico nodded.

The imam looked at Heico in a way that reminded him, suddenly, of his father. ‘I am not very much a believer in that. This country does not really belong to any of us – we are all just passing through. We need to do more than let each other live. We need to want each other to thrive.’

‘But not just the people,’ said Heico.

The imam nodded slowly. ‘You are right,’ he said.

Heico looked across at him as he stirred his coffee.

‘I think you want what is right,’ said the imam. ‘I also want what is right. We can’t both have what we want. If you say there is no compromise possible, I believe you.’

This last clause thumped Heico in the gut. His throat was tight so that he had to cough before he could speak again. ‘You shouldn’t just believe me,’ he said, ‘but if you’d let me, I’d like to show you.’

‘I don’t think that would do any of us very much good,’ said the imam.

‘Maybe it isn’t for any of us that we would be doing it.’ Heico sipped his coffee.

On the other side of the table the Mayor cleared his throat noisily. ‘I think if we could return to our places, perhaps we can resume while we finish our lunch.’

The imam stood obediently. He gathered his cup and napkin from where he had been sitting. ‘In the Qur’an we are told: There is no animal in the earth, nor a bird that flies on two wings, that are not communities like yours.’

Heico drew in a breath, but no words came to answer him, and the Mayor was beginning to bang his documents on the table in his impatience to begin.

Heico nodded. ‘Thank you,’ he said to the imam, which later seemed a stupid thing to have said, but at the time it was all that came to mind.

‘I have something for you,’ said Juliaan at the end of the meeting. ‘It’s in the car.’

Heico followed him and from the back seat Juliaan whipped out a boxed Easter egg, in shiny blue foil, and handed it to Heico with a flourish.

'I like to keep my sources sweet,' Juliaan said with a self-depreciating smile.

'Thanks.' Heico nodded and wedged the gift on top of his satchel.

'You don't eat chocolate?'

'No. Yes. My wife will probably help.'

'Well perfect, then,' said Juliaan, closing the car door. 'Perfect.'

'You should apply for citizenship,' Heico said to Eliza that evening. 'Save you doing the same paperwork over and over.'

The forms from the immigration office had arrived in the mail a week earlier. Eliza had left it until today to open the envelope and spread out the paperwork on the kitchen table. She was now frowning at the sheaf of instructions.

Eliza leaned back in her chair. She closed her eyes as if the very suggestion was exhausting to her. 'I don't mind the paperwork.'

She'd minded it last year and the year before: the endless repeating questions, the rounding up of payslips and identity documents.

'I just…'

'What?'

'I don't want to be Dutch. Some days I'm not sure if I even like the Dutch.'

The sting of this was unexpected. Heico bit his lower lip. 'It would just be a formality. To save you going through this same process every twelve months.

'But it's not just a formality, is it? If I have citizenship, then I'm Dutch.'

'Yes, well, you live here, you pay tax …'

She'd closed her eyes again as if resisting the practicality of this approach.

'If you don't want to, then don't; it's just that it would save you money and trouble. And you could vote. Have a say.'

'I'm just going to get this form in. It's not like we have time now to apply for citizenship before this form is due and God forbid I was late to get it in!'

Her sarcasm was for the Immigration Department, not him. Their inefficiency paired with insistence on their applicants' strict punctuality was a tired topic of discussion that she rehearsed *ad nauseum* with her expat colleagues.

He wished he could wind back the last few minutes. To just bring her a cup of tea and roll his eyes companionably at the forms' disinterest in her salary and insistence on her proving that he could support her. 'Sorry,' he said.

'What for?' she asked, irritation on the edge of her voice.

'Just sorry.' He picked up his satchel, removed the Easter egg, box slightly battered, and placed it on the kitchen counter. Then he took his laptop and papers to the study.

Nadia had often watched the man who fed the birds every morning, regular as prayer. From above, his moves seemed choreographed: his arms sweeping into the air, the seed arcing around and falling as the birds dipped and swooped and descended and gathered at his feet. He would turn, as the bag emptied and whip the last seed into the air straight from the sack and then walk away before the bounty he laid before them began to thin, as if he did not wish to witness their ingratitude.

Nadia wanted to speak to him. Was he young or old? She could not tell from above, but, this morning, if she slipped out a few minutes after the prayer, perhaps she could speak to him. Perhaps he would offer her a handful of seed to scatter. *Hold your hands like this*, he might say and then he would pour a little into her cupped hands.

She thought of it all through the *Salat*. What would his face look like? Would he tell her why he did it? Would he turn away from her as he did from the last squabbling birds?

'What is it?' asked Youssef.

She shook her head to indicate it was nothing, but his question made her feel ashamed of her interest in something so small. She looked down to the place by the rail line where the man would soon appear. She would go another day.

Sometimes, alone in the apartment as the sun dipped below the high rise office buildings before evening gathered overhead, Nadia wondered if her family had made a mistake in sending her here.

She looked forward to Youssef's return each day. Without him the apartment was too white and too quiet. The two of them would sit opposite each other at the table in the evening and she would

try to say something that might please him but he was often distant, unable to disguise his lack of interest in the small events of her day.

She wondered about her mother: how she had felt, when she first arrived in her father-in-law's house. How she had found a way to become the wife of someone wholly different from herself. She thought of her parents as a young couple, perhaps burdened with misunderstandings of their own, learning to build a new family, one floor above her grandparents' house.

'You will miss something simple,' Nadia's mother had said when she left their family home. 'Perhaps it will be the smell of this place or the dry desert air. But you will carry it with you, here.' She rested a hand on Nadia's chest as if checking for her heartbeat underneath. Her mother had cried when Nadia left but she had not understood. The smell and the air meant nothing, really. The air was different here, but that was not what caused the ache that would not leave her body. The ache for home was for the people she had left there. And her mother surely did not believe that it was the smells that she would miss. Perhaps she was only telling herself that to take her own ache away.

May 2004

<> The EU expands from fifteen to twenty-five nation states. <> The Protestant churches unite to form the PKN *Protestantse Kerk in Nederland*. Forty-one ministers leave the new church. <> Ajax wins the national soccer championship. <> Police drop their investigation into possible money laundering by real estate magnate Willem 'the silent' Endstra. Two days later he is shot and killed in front of his office in Amsterdam South <>

Heico and Eliza were standing in the supermarket trying to figure out which garbage bags to buy.

'I hate bug spray,' Eliza said for no apparent reason. 'Why should insects be killed just for existing?'

She took a can from the shelf and raised it to eye height as evidence. A national accusation: here were a people who gassed defenceless creatures 'just for existing.'

Heico took a deep breath, reached blindly for a random roll of garbage bags and said: 'Then we'll leave the bug spray this time.' He threw the garbage bags into the trolley with unnecessary force.

'What's up with you?' she asked when he snapped at her over her choice of bread.

'You should try these.' He gathered several sticky coiled donuts. 'From Zeeland.' He twitched with impatience to move on, but she stood at the end of the trolley to block his path.

'What is it?'

'You think we gas innocent creatures?'

'What? No. People who use bug spray –'

'No one I know uses bug spray. We barely have any bugs.'

'Well that's …'

He could feel that she was going to accuse him of lying.

'Well, good then.' She smiled a forced, conciliatory smile and stepped aside. 'Should we get cookies?'

He veered into the cookie aisle and she threw several different packages into the trolley: butter cookies, peanut cookies, almond slices and a plastic container of 'Jewish cookies', a box of the

rarely eaten, often commented upon 'negro kisses.'

'That's enough,' Heico said.

'Perhaps we should stock up.'

'Lizzy,' he said, 'It's enough, let's just go.'

'Now it's enough? I think it was enough a long time ago, but if you keep your heads down you can paint your faces black when Sinterklaas comes and not ask yourselves the question: What does this even mean?'

The St Nicolaas Day celebrations – six months away – were a recurring point of contention. He wished they were the type of household where they took turns to fill each other's shoes with jokey gifts.

'Please,' he said. Her face flushed a deeper red. They always spoke English and after a while, they both forgot that that was not in fact a level playing field. Her English was sophisticated and he sometimes struggled for the right turn of phrase. And she talked on and on, swaying, almost drunkenly it sometimes seemed from topic, to opinion, to factual reportage. He didn't know how to make it stop without upsetting her, though sometimes his need was so great that he simply forgot to be kind. He picked up the last box she had hurled into the trolley. 'It doesn't *mean* anything!'

'Of course it does!'

He recognised the unfocused anger in her eyes. 'Are we really going to do this in the supermarket?'

'You're right,' she said. She walked out, leaving him with the trolley and several people staring at him. A uniformed staff member looked at him with a face that clearly read *you are not going to leave that trolley like that are you?*

He pushed the trolley to the front of the store and waited in line to pay.

Do you not see that Allah is exalted by whomever is within the heavens and the earth and by the birds with wings spread in flight? Each of them has known his means of prayer and exalting Him, and Allah is knowing of what they do.

Qur'an 24:41

Our elders did not speak about the mosque directly in their talks but they began to reference the need for adaptation, the need to find new means to live as Muslims here where our numbers were small and our customs were feared and misunderstood. 'We need to find a way,' the imam said one Friday afternoon, 'to be believers amidst a world of unbelief.'

And the birds flew overhead, the water ran past the empty lot, and the plans for our mosque hung in the council chambers, the corners beginning to curl and the architects' pencil marks smudged with the recurring discussions of planning zones, land use, environmental impact studies and parking demand evaluations.

After prayer we gathered to discuss the local community. We were tired of their hypocrisy and their caution; we were tired of their bugs and their birds; we were tired of their ignorance and small-mindedness.

The people around us were outraged – our work colleagues, our neighbours. The local inter-church council expressed dismay in their general meeting and they wrote an open letter to the city newspaper stressing the importance of allowing us, their brothers and sisters in faith, the freedom to worship in a dedicated space. But there was only silence in reply. Their calls to action, diffused and dispersed while the birds continued to hold sway in the minds of those in the city's offices who perused the plans and held the town hall meetings.

It was our sisters who heard about a community fair and the suggestion came from them: we could sell food there.

We planned to hire a tent and posted sign-up sheets for food preparation in our square of pin-board in the foyer of the community centre. We would join the community events that were held in the area, with a stall that sold *gözleme* and *briwat* and *m'hancha*. It would give us a chance to meet people, for them to talk to us. Yes, food was a very good idea.

If people asked about the mosque we would have some information to hand but we would not force our plans on them or hang artist impressions from the tables. Mostly it would just be about being there. About being visible. It was, indeed, a very good idea.

June 2004

<> In Belgium, the right wing *Vlaams Blok* does well in the regional elections. <> A poll finds sixty-eight percent of Dutch people feel threatened by 'immigrant or Muslim young people'; fifty-three percent fear a terrorist attack in the Netherlands. <> Hendrikje van Andel-Schipper, the oldest person in the world, turns 114. She puts her longevity down to a daily portion of herring and orange juice. <>

July 2004

<> The Cassini-Huygens satellite reaches Saturn. <> The ban on the sale of absinthe is lifted after ninety-five years. <> 'Scootmobiel' races are held at Zandvoort to draw attention to the cuts in providing these vehicles to older people. <> Past director of PSV Eindhoven Football Club is sentenced to twenty-seven months in jail for having unprotected sexual relations with minors while knowing he was HIV positive. <>

August 2004

<> The Rijksmuseum makes its most expensive acquisition to date: Jan Steen's The Mayor of Delft and his daughter. <> Google is listed on the stock exchange. <> Pim Fortuyn's party members and anti-immigration Geert Wilders leave the VVD. <> Somalian-born politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali and film maker Theo van Gogh premier their short film *Submission* in which Qur'anic texts justifying violence are written on the injured bodies of barely covered Muslim women. <> The Dutch garner twenty-two medals at the Athens Olympics with gold in swimming, cycling and dressage. <>

One night Youssef took Nadia to a work function at the *Concertgebouw* in Amsterdam. They arrived early and stood in the foyer watching his colleagues sip prosecco, smiling apologetically at their mineral water. Youssef joked with them in Dutch and reached out to touch Nadia's back periodically, reassuring her, as if she was a child. One woman leaned in and introduced herself in French: 'I'm Fleur. It is nice to meet you at last.' And then: 'it has been cold – you must find it cold here,' and she smiled at Nadia's assent. 'I would like to go to Morocco,' Fleur said. 'I love couscous and those pots.' She traced the shape of a tagine in the air.

Nadia nodded. There was a silence. 'Youssef does not have one,' she said.

'No?' asked the girl in surprise. She touched Youssef's arm to call his attention from elsewhere, raised her eyebrows in mock incredulity and spoke a few words of Dutch to him in a lilting, teasing tone before switching back to French to ask Nadia: 'What is it called?'

'A tagine,' supplied Nadia feeling her disloyalty like sweat at the edges of her hijab.

'Tagine,' Fleur repeated to Youssef.

Youssef looked at Nadia, his dark eyes wide. 'What?'

Nadia looked away and the conversation turned away from her. Fleur's tone remained light and familiar. Youssef shook his head. He had an ease in Dutch that seemed to permeate his whole body. He seemed relaxed, his smile nearer to the surface.

Fleur laughed and touched her face. She turned to include Nadia in the joke and Nadia mirrored her smile though she did not know what was funny.

The audience filtered in and took their places – negotiating the micro-territories of the

armrests on either side. The concert was Verdi's *Requiem* and Nadia was shocked at the violence of the music though no one else seemed surprised. They got to their feet when it all ended. It felt as though it was hours, and many rounds of fear, judgment and retribution, after it had started. They clapped, until Nadia's hands stung, for the conductor, soloists, orchestra and choir.

Later, on the drive home, Youssef asked her: 'Why didn't you tell me you wanted a tagine?'

She had humiliated him. 'I do not want a tagine.'

'I don't understand.'

'She said she liked couscous. I was making conversation.'

He sighed. The car around them was dark and strangely quiet, like they weren't quite in the same world as everyone outside.

'Is their religion really like that?' she asked a little later. 'Like the music?'

'Most of them aren't religious.'

She wanted to press him, but sensed that perhaps he did not know the answer.

She wondered about Heico Brandsma, the man they said was holding up the mosque plans. Was he religious, she wondered? She had cleaned his house many times but now she was curious to see to him, perhaps to ask him a few questions. If she arrived earlier than usual tomorrow, perhaps he would still be home. She would ask Youssef to drop her off a little early.

Once home, they prayed the *Isha*. The God of that music – angry, fickle, vengeful and large – loomed across their night prayer.

Youssef fell asleep as soon as they were in bed. Nadia studied his face, softened in sleep, like a child's. She knew no one else like him: moral and easy-going, gregarious and open with friends and colleagues and then somehow shrunken and diminished afterwards.

She couldn't sleep. A choir in her head begged to be saved and she thought of tomorrow with trepidation, though she was not afraid, exactly. Outside the night was twilight blue for hour after hour and they did not draw the curtains.

Nadia woke early. Before the light had begun to appear at the horizon. The dawn was so early now that they were awake hours before their neighbours began to stir.

The prayer at dawn – God's most favoured prayer – when the morning light stretched across the full width of the sky brought a clarity, its repetition reassuring, its rhythms fortifying. Heico Brandsma was just a man, like any other. Like the shop keepers, like the bus drivers. A man like Youssef perhaps – they might have attended the same school, listened to the same music and seen the same movies growing up. There was nothing to fear from him, the man who liked birds.

It was very early still when Heico manoeuvred his bike between their car and the neighbour's and headed up the street. Today he was out of the house well before Eliza, who was usually ready to leave by the time he made it downstairs to flick the coffee machine on. Today Heico planned to head out to the sanctuary. He needed to clear his head. If he got to the office early he could take the truck out without needing to speak to anyone at all. He'd do another survey at the mosque site. It would give him some time to think. The light was still low in the sky and it was too early for any of his neighbours to have left yet, except Rik, who was no doubt already on the road.

He envied Rik, and anyone who spent most of their working hours driving. He envied the blankness he imagined he could achieve. The hum of driving and his music and the long, criss-crossing highways. Heico had sometimes thought he would like to work as a courier. But he would miss the birds. Perhaps he'd see them from the highway and wonder about them. Their own lonely journeys across countries and continents repeated and repeated without question. The warmth, the cool, the thermals, the food supply, driving them this way and that year to year, generation after generation.

When he arrived at the site the song-birds seemed unperturbed by the truck. He could identify several by the sound of their call – a trick he'd taught himself as a teenager which was not especially useful now, though it might speed up the identification of species for the survey this morning.

While he was in America, as a graduate student, he'd taught himself the collective nouns for each bird from a book and he could recite them, like a litany, even now. There was a time when he had imagined teaching the list to a child, while walking through the woods, but he did not think about

this anymore.

He breathed the cool, salt-and-sand air. The long summer day stretched out in front of him. Perhaps he'd think of something else he could do while he was out here. Take a look at the damage the deer were inflicting on the young trees, perhaps, and pay a visit to the rangers to check in.

He pulled on rubber boots and plastic pants. He'd wade out into the water. He didn't want to miss anything this morning, and he was in no hurry to be in the office.

Heico woke to the sound of the air-raid sirens. He had often thought of the day when they would have to use them and now, he thought, he had woken up into it.

Flood? For a moment he thought his bed was floating. Absurd. He was on the first floor. Eliza had left for work early and he had overslept. It was midday, first Monday of the month – just a routine test.

He remembered the strangeness of the continued schoolyard soccer game the first time he had heard the sirens. They were playing *Holland vs. Everywhere Else*. His classmates had grudgingly allowed him to play for Holland on a technicality: he had a Dutch passport, many of his international school classmates did not. But when the sirens began he had frozen, wanting to run but not sure which way to go. He looked wildly around as his classmates played on, several yelling at him when he failed to react. 'Never heard the sirens before, Brandsma?'

Heico had been slow to get used to it. It seemed like every month the siren test elicited another dreamed-up national apocalypse: water, chemical, airborne, engulfing flames. But the schoolyard remained oblivious to his discomfort. Bitumen, cheese sandwiches, milk and soccer balls.

But the sense of disturbance remained for Heico even now. The reminder of war or disaster sounding out among them. But this was just a test. He had overslept and now they had stopped again. He'd go straight to the town hall meeting and go to work after that. He'd tell anyone who asked that he'd been working from home this morning, his safety and privilege intact for another month.

At the meeting the Mayor announced his plans to arrange a tour of the unused churches in the

surrounding areas.

Heico remembered the barn swallows in the church last summer, the high ceilings and smell of old incense, settling like dust. 'Which churches?'

'The empty ones,' said Peter.

Heico had suggested a solution similar to this to Juliaan a week ago. Juliaan had raised his eyebrows. 'You want the mosque hidden behind a Christian façade?'

'It solves a problem. It solves several problems. Look at that one in Amsterdam.'

'That was the 1970s, in a crowded city. Can't we do better than that?'

'Why would we – if it's a good solution?'

'It's a fucking cowardly solution. It's insulting. Haven't we come further than that in thirty, forty years?'

Heico shrugged.

'Well we should have,' said Juliaan. His forehead shone with sweat. 'We should have.'

'It would be a "win-win",' the Mayor was saying, 'delivering urban space for the Muslim community to worship in.' He turned his body towards Heico, leaned his torso forward over the table and opened his hands ceremoniously. 'And the birds already know their way around those, right?'

Someone snickered.

Heico thought of the wooden pews coated in old dust; the stained glass windows – their yellows, pinks and greens still casting muted shapes across the floor; the way the coldness of the stone walls got into the air. He shivered. The idea of touring every abandoned church for miles, stopping to drink filtered coffee and gaze appraisingly at wooden beams with these people made him feel queasy.

'I can't make it,' said Heico without consulting his agenda. 'But don't change it on my behalf.' He turned to the imam. 'If you see something you can use, by all means ... though you might need a cleansing fire or something first.' He caught the Mayor's frown and clamped his mouth shut.

'Well let's pencil in that date then,' said Peter. 'In the meantime we'll schedule some facilitated discussions. We'll have Salema sit down with Heico. The historical society can meet with the imam to talk about the War graves. The conversations will be informal unless the parties prefer a

moderated format. At the end we can sit down and look at whether we've come any further in our thinking.'

Salema caught Heico's eye from across the boardroom table and, to his surprise, she winked. He could feel his face flush. Peter looked across at Heico. 'I can see Heico is looking forward to it.'

Heico waited in the reception area sipping iced water and flipping through a copy of *Architectural Digest*. He thought of Salema schmoozing with the councillors and the association long before he had known anything about their plans. He saw her looking at them with carefully composed features, a wisp of hair visible at the edge of her hijab. He pictured her at the head of a conference table, somewhere in this building of steel and glass, addressing her team with her quiet authority.
'She wouldn't have the job if it wasn't for the fact that she's female and Turkish,' he had said to Eliza the night before as they were getting ready for bed.

'Surely they just liked their design.'

'I think they liked the way it would look to have a woman heading up the project – progressive and open-minded. Makes the council look good and the Muslim community look like they are in line with local values.'

'Because she's a woman?'

'Because she's the definition of affirmative action.'

'She's probably a good architect. Women can be, I've heard. Turks too, no doubt.'

She turned her back to him. The curve of her shoulder blade protruded above the quilt. Her body was a landscape, glimpsed through binoculars.
Heico stood up from the low sofa to consider the artist's impressions of the mosque that hung on the opposite wall. The design was almost organic in form. The light in the prayer hall was otherworldly – shining like the faithful were already transported to some eternal presence. The space was filled with a golden glow that poured down from the ceiling as if this place had been ordained for the transcendent: set apart as sacred before it was even built.

He thought of the books his grandmother had sent him when he was a child with pictures of

the saints lit from inside, halos glowing. A certain quality of light was a shorthand for holiness. It felt uncanny and also vaguely comforting. The images of the library, kitchen and ablutions area all seemed mundane by comparison, though the people retained a glow as if, coming from prayer, they trailed some of the light from the central hall, some of God's glory caught in their cautiously unfashionable dress.

Heico thought about that space, dreamed up by Salema and her team. A thing conjured from nothing by the simple act of drawing it, waiting only for that rubber stamp in the council office before a whole cotillion of people would make this strange dream a real, air-filled place in the world. Her mosque – the image of it before him – even now was creeping towards reality.

Salema appeared beside him. 'If you think of the earth as having a sort of rhythm,' she said without making any effort to greet him. She pointed to a photograph of the dunes pinned above the drawings. 'The mosque should echo its location. There is no separation between where humans live and the sand, the sea.'

In the picture a father and son knelt in prayer. The image made him think of the patches of coloured light that fell on the pews as he lead the procession into church as an altar boy, making those sitting in the illumination seem chosen, somehow.

Salema raised her arm to direct his attention to the bird's eye view. 'The mosque's an integrated, multi-use space. Islam's not a once a week religion; it's a system for living the whole of your life. There's space for worship, but there will be a library, a bookshop, a kitchen, spaces for meetings and social occasions, language classes: Arabic, Dutch. No separation between life and worship – the way that prayer permeates the day and echoes the integration of God into every aspect of our lives.'

Heico nodded, reflecting that that was precisely what bothered people about it. It had taken Europe centuries to separate Church from State. Why would they want to go backwards on this?

With a gesture of her hand Salema directed him into a nearby meeting room.

'I want you to know that I don't have any objection to the idea of a mosque *per se*,' said Heico.

Salema closed the door and crossed to the window without comment. For a moment she stood looking down.

He took a seat at the table and opened his briefcase to pull out his materials. 'I understand that as a minority group –.'

'A minority group?'

'I'm just saying: I'm on board with the community centre in general terms, I am only concerned about the specific location.'

'There are a billion Muslims. It's the fastest growing religion in Europe.'

Heico clicked his case shut to afford himself an unobstructed view of her. He thought it was probably fair to assume that most of those billion would not approve of the woman standing before him: twenty-something, apparently single, heading up a major project for a prestigious architectural firm. 'This is not what we're here to talk about.'

'You're right.' She moved towards the table. 'Let's focus on the building.'

'Well from my perspective this is unsolvable while the project remains on the proposed block.'

'Oh?' She seemed genuinely disappointed 'I had hoped we could talk accommodations. I've been looking at bird-visible glass, maximum façade heights, adjustments to the building profile perhaps.' It was as if this were a university case study she had been hoping to solve.

He spread his hands, palms upwards, on the table in a gesture of apology.

She shrugged. 'Even if this goes ahead, I won't handle a single beam. I want to do the best job I can and then it's not up to me any more.' She folded her hands on top of each other on the table. 'So, can we talk about adaptations, or are we wasting each other's time?'

Heico considered. If the building was going to be approved, was it best to get what adaptations could be had now, or would these concessions – once in place – make it all too easy for the councillors to give the project the green light? He slid his briefcase off the table and put it on the floor beside him. He hated being in this position. 'Show me what you've come up with.'

And the birds gathered in assemblies: all with him did turn to Allah.

Qur'an 38:19

The ten-minute film was broadcast in the sleepy summer season so that almost no one saw it when it was first screened. *Submission* they had called it, the filmmaker Theo van Gogh and the ex-Muslim politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Most of us had not actually seen it, yet the news of its content burst into our community like a stray firework: volatile, dangerous, spitting and sparking with unspent rage.

Privately, for those of us who did see it, it leached into our bodies and clamped in our guts. The raw accusation of it, the violence. A wild, horrible nightmare made manifest – sexualised, brutalised and brought into visual reality. It was not the words borrowed from our holy books that was shocking. It was the living, moving women, near naked and speaking their own words against us, out into the world.

Or perhaps it was just me. I watched the film with lowered eyes, ashamed at my desire to see these things – both the beauty and the ugliness of it. I felt sick: sick at the words the women spoke, sick at the blasphemy of the film and so tired of how everything seemed to conspire against our community's simple wish for a place to live and worship.

But underneath that, there was something else I had forgotten from long ago: my aunt with a swollen cheek, clutching a wet cloth to her face. My mother bustling us back out of the room and my father's voice: 'Leila, it's enough, you have to …' And then sweet tea and pastries like nothing had happened: my aunt bright and high-pitched and my mother echoing her, pouring more tea, talking about the news from the city, the air tight and thin in the room. My uncle did not return until after we were gone and the next time all was back to normal. My stomach turned at the memory of it.

If we had built the mosque ten years ago … but we had not had the resources or the numbers to justify it then. We were spilling out the doors at the community centre. On the holy days we had to hire a school hall. And now there was this film, this hatred, this wilful misunderstanding of who we are and of what Islam means. And once again our mosque felt very far away.

And some of our brothers had begun to ask: is this really where we want to be? In a community that would fight so hard to hold us at arm's length? In a place that would lie, exaggerate and protest to keep a modest, beautiful building from being built in an inconspicuous location on the edge of town? In a country where, though we are a minority, our own sister turns against us with an ugly film, with her angry speeches and her pandering to politicians and media personalities who want us to leave?

'We must teach our neighbours about our religion,' said our leaders. 'Not to convert them, but to show them who we are, to show them that Islam is not violence but peace. To show them that Christians and Jews are our brothers and sisters, that their stories are our stories and our God is their God.'

'Meetings not media,' urged our leaders, 'conversations not conversions.'

We reminded each other how lucky we were to be here. God had allowed us to offer our children the opportunities at our door. And we returned to our workplaces to find our car spaces had been taken in our absence, and conflicts that we did not want to be a part of raged on here and there. And we persisted and we prayed to a God who was always listening, even if He seemed in no hurry for our mosque to be built.

Heico drank his coffee, half watching the morning news. On the television, stills from Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Theo van Gogh's short film flickered. These were things she'd seen, she said, in the hospitals and women's shelters where she'd been sent to translate. These were the stories she'd heard: stories of rape and domestic violence related by young women captive to their families' religious beliefs. The film showed women's bodies beaten, the words of the Qur'an etched onto their skin: *Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property for the support of women. So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them.* The images in the film were horrifying and yet the women's bodies, veiled and marked with welts and bruises, were still strangely beautiful.

When he got to the office Heico turned on the computer and flicked open his email. There was one from an old colleague, Sven.

I have your name plugged into a Google alert, because of our paper. Today this came up.

Heico opened the link at the bottom of the email and scanned the page. Anti-mosque and anti-Islamic sentiment thinly disguised as 'protecting our families,' 'a clear sighted response to the agenda of our current political leaders.' Heico was quoted, in a paragraph that sprawled and rambled. Presumably the original quote had been taken from one of Juliaan's articles, but it was impossible to see where what he said ended and the freewheeling conjecture of the writer continued.

Heico's stomach turned.

Thanks, he mailed back. *And: ugh!*

That's what I thought, replied Sven. *Didn't want to presume though ...*

Heico felt ill at the thought of his friend wondering if these were truly his views. He set up a search that would capture various configurations of his name and initials and clicked 'run now.' His

screen filled with a dozen recent matches. Some were legitimate: the minutes of the last council meeting, an upcoming conference, several links to articles in the city newspaper. But there was more. The link Sven had sent was one of several that Heico's own search turned up. Sites with titles that reinforced their position as concerned citizens but it did not take many lines of text to clarify that their main concern was with the influx of 'migrant influences.' Sven's hit had been the most local version, but there were sites in English and German where he had been translated and quoted as the expert on this specific case, where 'politicians were burying their heads in the sand while scientists and other experts were speaking their truth in vain' as one site phrased it. Heico saved the search and set up notifications to send to his email address.

Outside his window a wedge of barnacle geese flew by. The synchronisation of their flight held an order that Heico found reassuring. An Irish colleague had once told him that in the Middle Ages people believed that barnacle geese grew on trees or like barnacles from driftwood because no one ever saw their eggs. There were clerics who argued they could be eaten on fasting days in Lent since they were not 'flesh born of flesh.' The truth, of course, was that they bred in the far north in the summer and only returned to continental Europe when the Artic water turned to ice again. It amused him, in a sour sort of way, the knack humans had of turning nature's mysteries to such profoundly self-interested ends.

September 2004

<> A three day siege on a school in Breslan, Russia, leaves three hundred and forty children dead. <> Haiti is hit by a series of hurricanes resulting in flooding and thousands of deaths. <> The death of folk singer Andre Hazes triggers mass mourning. Fifty thousand fans gather in the Amsterdam Arena to clap, sing, cheer and cry as colleagues, friends and family members pay their respects in word and song. <>

Heico ran into Salema in the reception area of the council office. She had got married at the end of the summer. Someone she had met at university.

Heico smiled. ‘An architect?’

‘Landscape.’ She seemed to push away the topic with her long fingers, her wedding band new and golden on her right hand.

Heico wondering what this new husband thought of her wearing the hijab over her hair and covering up neck to ankle. Perhaps he found it exciting that only he got to see her hair, her body, her skin.

Salema looked out through the large glass panels towards the lake and didn’t say anything for a long time.

Heico took in the 1960’s restaurant building that sat on the edge of the lake. ‘It’s like you can see things that aren’t there.’

She rested one hand on the folio. ‘I want this mosque to be good in every sense. How can you make something for God if you don’t want it to be a good thing in the world?’

‘Yeah,’ said Heico. ‘Well.’

She turned her body to face him. ‘Have you been to Istanbul?’ she asked.

Heico shook his head.

‘Many of the Ottoman mosques have bird palaces. The birds have their own domes and minarets and stone latticework built into the outside walls. For centuries, part of the mosque budget went to feeding the birds in these bird houses.’ She brushed her fingers down the fabric of her skirt.

Her eyes were far away. ‘Why do we have to choose? Why can’t we accommodate the birds – just the way we accommodate the wind, the sun and the elevation of the block?’ She frowned and glanced at her watch. ‘I don’t know if it is helpful, but I was telling Cees,’ she faltered slightly in saying her new husband’s name – the proprietary note not yet comfortable, ‘about the Ottoman architect Mimar Sinan.’

She told Heico about a sixteenth-century Sultan who commissioned a mosque with the specification that it would not get any bird droppings on it. So Sinan searched for a solution. Finally he found a place on the Bosporus where the North wind meets the South and waves slam down on the shore with such wildness that no bird ever flew over it and there he built the mosque. ‘His smallest and most beautiful creation,’ Salema said. ‘And to this day, the birds do not land on the mosque and they are not the slightest bit perturbed by its presence.’

‘Well if you can find a space like that,’ said Heico, ‘I suggest you plan your mosque there.’

She frowned and shook her head as if to indicate that he had wilfully misunderstood her, but Peter had come out to bring them into the meeting room and she did not attempt to clarify.

Later, as the meeting dragged on, Heico turned the idea over in his head. Like a riddle. A mosque on which no bird could land. Where the winds meet and the waves pound the shores below. An environmental solution – no meshes, or gratings, no bird-visible glass. But Sinan had had the whole of Istanbul to find his solution; they had a single block.

‘Could you not split the building and create a corridor for the birds to fly through?’ It was the young woman who took the notes. The idea seemed to take hold of the room.

Salema’s face crumpled. She turned to Heico to refer the question on. He shot her a sympathetic smile. The idea was completely fanciful. Even if this development was a large shopping-centre or hotel – large enough to allow for such an addition – the birds were wild animals, not interior decoration.

The note-taker sat staring into the room in the wake of the tumbling enthusiasm for her idea, making no effort to note it – or the reaction it provoked – in the minutes. Nor did she venture to

elaborate and indeed, no one seemed to have paid any attention to where this idea had come from. A number of the men had tilted their gaze upwards – perhaps imagining a parade of lapwings, shrikes and parakeets passing by overhead.

'This seems impractical, I'm afraid,' said Heico. 'To try to lead birds through some especially designed corridor seems at best likely to be unsuccessful and at worst would mean birds colliding with reflective surfaces.'

There was a murmur of discontent at this, as if people suspected him of being difficult, but Salema threw him a grateful smile. No doubt if they had said it was possible, the added budget required would have derailed the idea in the end, but first there would have been weeks of drafting, costing and consultations with engineers.

Why, wondered Heico, did humans seem to need to bring everything – even wild animals – inside with them?

Outside the council offices Heico paused to look out across the lake. Overhead a skein of geese honked their afternoon news one to another, their bodies dark then light with the beating of their wings. A moment later two storks flew over – one behind the other – their bodies stretched long, necks extended – silver against a darkening sky.

'Dr Brandsma?'

Heico turned and shook the hand of an older gentleman allowing the erroneous salutation to stand. Had he been in the meeting? Heico hadn't seen him there.

The man took up a position beside Heico, facing out to the lake. 'I've been reading about your work on the bird reserve. We've been wanting to do something like it down in De Biesbosch – set up a research institute, that is. Maybe some advocacy work when necessary.' He stood with his legs set apart as if the two of them were looking at the problem in physical form standing before them. He glanced across at Heico to gauge his reaction to his next words 'Now if we could get someone from an established program to speak for our ideas…?'

Heico glanced across at him but said nothing. The tidal wetlands were a network of estuaries

created when a storm collapsed some dykes six hundred years ago. A landscape of water, willows and grasses with flooded footpaths and fresh water fishing. They had reintroduced beavers there recently and by all reports they were thriving.

'Or, better yet, if we could convince him to come down South to head up the team ...'

'You want me to work for you?'

'Strictly speaking I'd be working for you, but – yes, I wanted to run the idea by you. We have funding for one year to put together a proposal and after that we'd be at the mercy of whatever the powers-that-be decide.' Here he held up his hands in a gesture of supplication to the will of the universe. 'It's an independent outfit. We'd be relying on grants and philanthropic donations. I couldn't guarantee that they'd fund us going forward. But that's why we're interested in having you come down and head up the team. We want someone who's done this type of thing before. And obviously it's a bonus if they're Dutch. Makes communication easier in the office.' He paused and kicked lightly at a stone embedded in the soil at his feet. 'I've proposed we set up a director role with guaranteed research hours so you could pursue your own interests as well as working with us on our funding applications and government proposals. We've got a few possible candidates in mind for the role but you're top of our wish list.'

Heico felt something unfamiliar stir in the pit of his stomach, a sort of excitement. A new start, a brand new office with no baggage, no built up resentments or simmering conflicts with staff he had supervised too long. It would be like getting a new set of pencils and notebooks: the uncomplicated beauty of projects not begun. He smiled at the man. 'Your name was?'

'Bram Groenendaal.' He handed Heico a business card. 'Sven Dieleman mentioned your name a few years back – I've been watching your work for a while now. Think about it,' he said. 'We're very interested in having you if you could see your way clear to relocating. Either way we'd welcome your input on our proposal.'

Heico looked at the card. Dordrecht. Eliza would hate it there: too far from Amsterdam and her cosmopolitan theatre friends.

'We like what you're doing up here. We'd do our best to make it worth the trouble.' He

reached out his hand to shake Heico's. 'Give me a call,' he said before disappearing into a dark car parked nearby.

'Who was that?' asked Juliaan emerging from the council offices.

Heico nodded at the card still in his hand. 'A colleague.' He glanced at his watch. 'Shall we get a coffee?'

As Heico tucked the card into his pocket for a moment he wondered: was someone trying to tempt him with an attractive job offer to keep him away from the mosque negotiations? But, no, surely he was just being paranoid.

Heico and Juliaan sat outside at a wooden table and Heico pointed out the circling kestrels, watching for voles or mice.

Juliaan nodded distractedly. 'My editor wants me to write a piece about the graves in the *Kennemerduinen*,' he shrugged. 'You don't hear anyone mention them from one year to the next but this year there were twice as many people at the anniversary service. Funny thing is, I wrote a feature on them when I was a student and couldn't get anyone to publish it.'

'What happened to the church refurb idea?' Their coffees had arrived but Heico wasn't sure if he should drink his. He felt jittery. There was lots of stuff to do back at the office and the job offer had him on edge. 'Didn't they have a specific church in mind?'

'The association decided they wanted to build something that reflected the Islamic aesthetic – if they were investing all that capital.'

'But they were going to *give* them the church, weren't they?'

'They'd probably sell it for a token fee on the condition that they didn't alter the façade and that they maintained the building. But with the maintenance costs it didn't seem worth it.' Juliaan had reached for the artificial sweetener and was stirring his coffee with a spoon that seemed too small for the cup. 'They want to invest in something that reflects their own values, not pay the maintenance bill for one of ours.'

'Right,' said Heico.

Juliaan took a deep breath and glanced down at his coffee cup. 'Of course, the decision wasn't unanimous.'

Heico raised his eyebrows at this.

'They all come from different places and classes and theologies. The progressives want the women to sit with the men; the conservatives want to forbid the young people from taking dance classes at school. There are people who want an enormous minaret on the mosque and a call to prayer five times a day. I don't report all that stuff – for one thing, who would care and for another, I can't see who would benefit from airing all that dirty laundry. But I think it was mostly the younger people who wanted to hold out for something that really looks like a mosque.'

Heico pushed his untouched coffee away.

'Think about it: if you were a teenager in a Dutch school and your parents couldn't speak Dutch and didn't want you to socialise with girls and no one at school understood why you got an extra long lunch break on Fridays and at the same time there wasn't even a proper mosque where you could meet other young people in the same situation.' Juliaan's forehead was creased in empathy for this imagined teenager. 'And then your parents want to complain about the school. They want separate gym glasses for boys and girls and they won't let you be in the school play…'

Heico studied Juliaan's face. 'When did you tell your parents?'

Juliaan flushed. 'When did I tell my parents what?'

'That you're gay.'

Juliaan took a sip of coffee before responding. 'When I started university. The day I left home. They were OK with it. Sort of. Mum said she knew. She probably did.'

'And your Dad?'

'I don't see that much of Dad anyway.' Juliaan seemed to relax a bit, sitting lower in his chair. He shrugged. 'The Muslim kids often feel isolated from their peers. They don't have any connection with their parents' home countries so all they have left is their religion and in lots of cases that makes them even more attached to the doctrines and symbols of their faith. Most of the kids don't go to Friday prayers with their parents but some go looking for somewhere to fit in. There's a youth group

at *El-Tawheed*.'

'The Amsterdam mosque?'

'The one in the news for having stuff in their bookshop about female circumcision and radical jihad.'

Heico frowned.

'They've been rapped over the knuckles and the books are gone but is it books that are the problem or the people who thought it was a good idea to stock them?'

Heico shook his head. One of the kestrels dipped steeply into the trees on the other side of the road and did not reappear.

'I've gotta go,' Juliaan said glancing at his watch. 'Shall we…?'

'I'll let you know if anything new comes up.'

'Great. Great.' Juliaan nodded and pressed his palms down on the table. 'Well, see you then.' He twisted awkwardly as he stood up from the bench. Heico shaded his eyes as he looked up. And then, behind Juliaan's head, Heico saw the kestrel reappear: wings spread wide, head low, his next meal clutched in his talons.

October 2004

<>A cover of Andre Hazes' *Zij Gelooft in Mij* is posthumously a number one hit. <> Unions organise a demonstration against Premier Balkenende's austerity measures; negotiations follow and the government agrees to some concessions in return for the unions holding back with salary demands. <> *Simon*, a film dealing with euthanasia and gay marriage, wins all the big prizes at the *Nederlands Film Festival*. <> Typhoons and earthquakes hit Japan. <> A new translation of the Bible is released; Queen Beatrix is presented with the first copy. <>

There is not a moving creature on the Earth, nor a bird that flies on its two wings, but they are communities, the likes of you.

Qur'an 6:38

The bird watchers told a reporter they had seen fewer sea birds this year and a sense of foreboding flooded into our community and a sense of ill-ease settled on us all.

The truth was, while some of us had never understood what the fuss was all about, there were those among us who were sad and even ashamed. Our eco-friendly building plans looked foolish and misguided under the critical gaze of the public but by now we were committed to the solar water heating, the complicated ventilation systems, the grey-water recycling – though to some of us they now seemed hypocritical.

By now the delay had allowed us to build our resources and if the mosque was approved we would be able to push forward: materials, workmen, legal fees, architects. And perhaps this country had taught us her own impatience.

Our sisters spoke with the other mothers on the edge of the school playground. Our children ran with theirs over the play equipment in the schoolyard and people said: See! The children are blind to our differences. But children don't build mosques, or work at the city council. And it was clear that it was time for a new approach only, we did not know what it should be.

It was the architect who came up with a solution: '*Spandoeken*,' she said. 'We pre-print banners and ask our allies to hang them – the churches that have been supportive in the media for

example.' A few people nodded slowly. 'We could use green fabric,' she continued, 'so they know their messages are from this community, but no Arabic. Even *salam alaikum* may seem aggressive, unless we translate it.'

'Who's going to pay for it?' asked someone.

The young architect said she would speak to her firm. 'It's good publicity for us,' she said. 'We're committed to the mosque now anyway so any good news…' And indeed, *Kuiper & Doeglas* agreed to pay in return for a small logo in the corner of the banner.

'A small investment,' they said, 'and a gesture of goodwill.'

Ismail, who headed our finance team nodded gravely, knowing how much money we had already spent on their services for a building design that might never go ahead.

The first banner hung at the library before the end of the week. *I have made you into tribes and nations that you may know each other*, it said. The bright green banner was arresting and the press took photographs and interviewed the librarians and patrons and everyone seemed so pleased with this solution that we offered a banner to the Jewish synagogue. *None of you has faith until he loves for his brother or his neighbour what he loves for himself,* it read and the Rabbi and the elders accepted it from us, 'in a gesture of friendship and mutual respect' a letter that arrived a few days later said. And we sent our team to hang it on Friday after communal prayer. Dropping off a couple more to the local churches on the way.

We printed several more for future occasions. *There is no compulsion in religion; Allah commands kindness and justice; The best of you is one who is best to his wife*.

'No point in turning the whole town green in one go,' said the architects, who did not want to risk getting on the wrong side of the city council. And so the banners sat waiting in a cupboard at the architects' firm, for we had no space to store such things at the community centre.

Not long after that local schools began to phone to ask for Muslims to come and speak to the students about peace and tolerance and mutual understanding. But when we looked out into the classrooms we saw that we were already represented there: our children sat amongst theirs, their faces turned up eagerly to hear what we had to say.

Once, a traveller, seeing four men sitting together, decided to give them some money. One of the men was Iranian, one Arab, one Turkish and one Dutch.

'Buy whatever you like with this money,' said the traveller.

The men accepted the gift graciously, but when the traveller had moved on they began to argue.

The Iranian, said, 'Let's buy some "angür" with this money.'

The Arab disagreed. 'I don't want any "angür," I want some "inab."'

The Turk, didn't like either of those ideas. 'I don't want any "angür" or "inab." Let's buy some "üzüm,"' he said.

And the Dutchman said: 'No, no, no. I want some "druiven." Let's buy "druiven" with this money!'

The four men argued loudly, each yelling his preference in the hope of convincing the others.

Just then a scholar happened to walk by and, hearing the disagreement, approached the men to ask them what the trouble was. Each man explained that the others would not listen to reason – and told the scholar what he wanted to spend the money on.

The scholar listened to each of the men in turn and, when each had spoken, said: 'Give me your money and I will make all of you happy.'

The four men looked at each other doubtfully but they handed over the money and the scholar disappeared and returned twenty minutes later with a large basket of grapes and the men – as promised – were all happy.

The scholar had understood that each man was using a different language but that they all wanted the same thing.

The children looked from me to their teacher. They seemed perplexed.

'Does anyone have any question for Mr …'

'They can call me Kadim.'

A blonde girl with an earnest expression raised her hand. 'Umm. Excuse me,' she said. Her brow was furrowed with concern.

I nodded for her to go ahead.

'Were there any girls there that day?'

'Ah yes,' I said, thinking quickly. 'The traveller and the scholar were both women. Did I forget to say that?'

When the sun slipped below the horizon Nadia and Youssef prayed together and then sat at the table to break the fast. In Morocco, her family often ate with neighbours during Ramadan, enjoying the warmth of the day still clinging to the earth. Or they gathered at the mosque for the *Iftar* and the children, once fed, ran around with friends while the adults indulged in conversation and perhaps a little more food than usual, reasoning that since they had denied themselves since sun up a little more would do no harm. Water tasted better after a day of self-denial. Dates tasted sweeter and the gatherings were filled with companionable laughter. As children they had often been allowed to play well past their usual bedtimes when conversations with neighbours and friends held their parents' attention well into the night.

She missed those evenings of companionship now, in their air-conditioned apartment many storeys above the earth. For tonight she had tried to find the ingredients for a favourite dish of her father's, *B'stilla*. In the end she had prepared it with chicken thighs, as a women in her Dutch class had suggested. To Nadia it tasted dull and flavourless but Youssef exclaimed enthusiastically over it. His grandmother had made something similar for him when he was a small boy; he had forgotten it

until now. How clever she was.

She was grateful, but the dish was not what she had hoped and she longed to be home, gathered at the mosque, the warm air holding, the cool only beginning to touch their skin as they returned to their homes in small groups. The mosque was always the centre of their communities but during Ramadan its role was more pronounced. She missed the way it drew them in and held them together for a few hours and, when they dispersed for the night, that it somehow held them together still.

She sighed.

'You miss home?'

She nodded and broke a small piece bread in her fingers, but did not yet eat it.

'I understand,' he said.

It was difficult to know how he could – barely having left the country of his birth and apparently not interested in eating with his family tonight. Why weren't they there now, instead of sitting in the grey quietness breathing new furniture and the smell of new walls? At his parents' house they might have sunk their feet into the deep carpets and sat companionably against plump cushions; there certainly would have been an abundance of food and many voices, a fullness to mark the end of the day, a few hours spent in familial companionship, together before rest.

The next morning Nadia watched from the corner as the bird-man laid his parcels on the park bench by the tree. He wore a dark jacket and tailored trousers.

She watched as he tilted his face skywards and began to spread the seed. He was a reverse puppeteer, drawing the birds low to the ground with his offering. He watched, with the benevolence and detachment of a god as they landed – their ethereal forms suddenly things of the earth, their bodies solid and their legs unsubstantial.

The birds squabbled and scratched at the earth. They squawked and chirruped a hundred different bird sounds, desperately scrabbling for their share of the spoils, their movements skittish and uncontained – small flurries of feather and air. Heads bobbing in irregular repetitions. Others were

more reluctant – pushed back, picking at the edges of the mêlée, waiting their turn. And still more birds came, tracing wide circles in the sky in their collected trajectories, spiralling wide as they descended.

She could smell the birds now – the sharp pungency of their excrement, the chalk and dust of feathers, the borrowed smell of the coast – salt and fish and sea. A small distance away, the highway rumbled behind its sound-barrier walls and not far behind her stood their own apartment, further from the ground than any human should live.

And then she realised that she knew him. His jacket. The way he moved his arms. It was Kadim who told stories to the children. He had not seen her yet and her impulse was to withdraw, to not disturb him.

Kadim did not know quite why he did it. It had begun with a large bag of breadcrumbs: a gift from a shopkeeper that no one in the community could think of a use for. 'Go feed it to the birds,' the imam had said to him. That was years ago. Now he had an understanding with a pet store near his apartment.

When he fed the birds he could feel God so close he could almost touch Him. The words of the Qur'an repeating in his head: the birds held aloft by nothing but God – truly these are signs for those who believe.

He knew they were only a few of God's creatures; but this small thing he could do. For these few, today was a better, more abundant, day. And for Kadim too. If only he could feed all of Allah's people and all His creatures, provide for all their needs in a few swoops of his hand.

He knew better than to think that this act made him a better person than anybody else. He knew that he did this only for himself, for the joy of it. But when loneliness and disillusionment seemed to be everywhere around him, this morning ritual – after the prayer – was a comfort that never let him down. The dance of gravity; the swing and arc of the seeds as they fell in abundance all around him; the flutter and squabble of the birds.

He turned to gather his parcels, folding the empty sack and tucking it under his arm and he saw her approaching, the young woman who had married Youssef a few years ago. Her clothing was still the muted colours of the mountains of his own childhood – now so distant both in time and space – but the place that some in the community still called 'home.'

'*Goede morgen*,' she said and she met his eyes and smiled. This secret had been discovered, but he did not feel this as a stripping away of something – as he had long feared he would – but as a

widening.

'*As-salamu alaykum'* he replied but she had already slipped by him on her way into town.

‘What about Kadim, who reads to the children?’ Nadia asked Youssef one evening not long afterwards, wanting to hold his secret close and longing to speak of it at the same time. ‘Does he live nearby?’

‘Kadim?’ Youssef turned from her for a moment as if he had left something in the hallway, but then turned back, placing his hands on the back of the nearest dining chair. He seemed nervous. ‘Kadim lives in an apartment a few blocks from here. He lives with a friend he has known since university. Eelco. A nice guy, I’ve met him a few times.’ Youssef swallowed and looked at her before continuing. ‘They were housemates at university and then, when everyone else moved out I guess they still liked living together and neither of them got married so …’

Nadia sensed that he wanted her to understand more than the words he was saying. ‘So?’

‘So, I don’t know, they moved here. Eelco works at the university in Delft. Kadim does some work for the Association and teaches the boys Arabic. It works OK. I don’t think his parents know, but it’s OK here,’ he smiled at her reassuringly.

She wanted to reassure him in return. ‘OK then,’ she said and she returned his smile.

Youssef nodded, satisfied.

For days afterwards Nadia turned the conversation over in her mind. This new information would not settle but flapped, and swooped, and dived, like a gathering of hungry birds.

After they had ordered, Eliza sat back in her seat and played with her wedding ring, watching Heico's face. 'I want to go home for the holidays,' she said.

'I don't think I can get away this year,' Heico said. 'With the council meetings and ... If I went now, I'd be afraid they'd just sign off on the development and we'd come back to bulldozers and chainsaws.'

Eliza stared beyond him out the window. 'I doubt it. But maybe I should go alone this time. If you save your holidays we can do something else next year. You don't want to sit around in the suburbs watching me and my sisters cook and squabble.'

Heico thought of his father sitting in Oma's kitchen at Christmastime, longing to be at home in the Australian sunshine.

The pancakes arrived: apple-cinnamon for Eliza, 'oriental' for him. The waitress placed a small jug of syrup between them. 'Enjoy!' she said with enthusiasm unblunted by repetition.

Eliza removed her knife and fork from their paper sheath, watching him.

He was hungry, he realised now, and he ate several mouthfuls before speaking. 'I don't think …' He didn't even know what he thought, he just didn't want her to go away right now. 'Maybe if we wait until the new year, we can both ...'

Eliza looked down at her food. 'Is it the money?'

'You should go, if you want to.'

'But you don't want me to?'

'Not right now.'

'When?'

'We should go in the summer. The weather will be better and it's easier to get away.'

'For you maybe.'

'Yes, for me.'

'I'm not asking you to come.'

Something heavy lodged itself in his abdomen. 'It's Christmas and just Mum and me in that apartment ...'

It would be like the Christmases after his grandparents had moved to the nursing home. After they'd visited Oma and Opa, Christmas day was just the two of them and the world felt deserted with everyone else inside their houses, the streets grey and empty with the buzz of disappointment in the crisp, cold air.

'Have her over to ours.'

That was worse. 'Look, it doesn't matter. If you really want to, then you should go but if you're asking me what I'd prefer, I'd prefer you didn't go.'

Eliza topped up her mineral water from the bottle beside her glass. 'OK,' she said.

'OK what?'

'OK, I won't go.'

Heico was surprised at this.

'But next year, even if you can't make it ...'

Heico nodded and shot her a grateful smile. Next year seemed a long way away. 'I'll make sure I can make it,' he said and he reached across the table for her hand.

November 2004

<> Theo van Gogh is assassinated by a twenty-six year old Moroccan-Dutch man. Ten thousand gather at Dam Square to give voice to their outrage. One day later a Muslim march is held which echoes the anger at the filmmaker's assassination and calls for dialogue and peace. <> Mosques and Islamic schools are targeted and the Islamic primary school in Uden burns to the ground. <> 174 violent incidents are recorded with mosques targeted forty-seven times and churches thirteen times<> George W. Bush is re-elected. <> America attacks in Fallujah, Iraq. <> Following a popular television vote, the Greatest Dutch person of all time is announced. <> Imam Salam refuses to shake hands with Immigration Minister Rita Verdonk saying that this is forbidden in the Qur'an. <>

It was a Tuesday morning and Theo van Gogh rode his motorised bike through the streets of Amsterdam on his way to work on his film about the assassination of politician Pim Fortuyn. On the *Linnaeusstraat* a young Dutch- Moroccan man on a push-bike drew level with him and shot the filmmaker with a handgun.

The wounded Van Gogh called out: 'Can't we talk about this?' A profoundly Dutch impulse: surely we can solve this with words.

The man shot him eight times, slit his throat and then stabbed him as he lay across the bike path. Then he took another knife and with it pinned a note to the filmmakers' body.

The street was peopled with passers-by on their way to work. The young man did not seem perturbed. 'What are you looking at?' he said to an onlooker.

'What are … No …You can't do that,' the woman said flounderingly reaching for another Dutch convention: telling others how they should behave.

'I can. Why not? ... He was asking for it.'

'You can't do that, you can't.' Perhaps she was struck by the futile understatement of her words, as if she'd caught him littering or shoplifting, and not killing a public figure in the street.

'I *can* do that,' the assassin said, 'and now you'll all know what's coming to you too.'

The note on Van Gogh's body was addressed to the senator who had worked with him on the short film *Submission*. The note was long-winded and lavishly referenced with texts from the Qur'an, but its message to Hirsi Ali, was clear*: you're next.*

Heico pulled plastic pants on over his work trousers to protect them from the rain on his ride to work. It was cold now – it was almost Christmas again – and he felt tired. He thought of Theo van Gogh riding along the *Linnaeusstraat* shot and knifed to death on a Tuesday morning. It started to seem like this *was* the type of place where people were killed for what they said, for who they were, or for what they thought if they thought it loudly enough. The young man they arrested had spent months in a room teaching himself enmity from a computer screen, consuming screeds of hatred merged with carefully selected qur'anic verses – almost as if he wanted to echo Van Gogh's own mistakes.

Heico had always felt a distant affection for Theo van Gogh – the rich boy grown into untidy artist-come-public-voice-of-dissent. He empathised with the sense of disquiet that the filmmaker seemed to represent and, though he disagreed with most of his disjointed opinions, the news of his murder came as a sickening shock that held a tinge of the personal – as if they had been through something together. The violence of Van Gogh's death – that in itself was surreal, like some barbaric medieval film. It was impossible to imagine against the back-drop of an Amsterdam rush hour. And yet somehow …

And every human, We have fastened his bird (of destiny) upon his own neck…

Qur'an 17:13

When the news reached us of the assassination of Theo van Gogh we felt it like an unexpected punch. The shock settling into horror: a Muslim youth, though not connected to any particular community. The horror at how this seemed. The horror that it had happened at all.

'Can't you see?' someone said. 'We are becoming what they think we are.'

'No,' said another: 'they are beginning to see that we truly believe.'

But others shook their heads and lowered their eyes. We were angry and frightened and outraged and sickened. And we knew this would mean only bad things for all of us.

Theo van Gogh had not been beloved of our community: opinionated, untidy, spilling ugly words and unfounded opinion on cheap television with always more words, more ignorance, more dismissal of people different from himself.

The people brought sunflowers, candles and cigarettes to the place where Van Gogh had died. They laid down roses, still in cellophane, and film canisters. They brought cactuses, cards and hand-drawn cartoons.

'Today you, tomorrow us,' read one of the cards, 'because, once again, it's all just words.' And the threat of more violence gathered in the air.

That night the city bells rang out for him. He had never been one for silent tributes, they said. He had never hesitated to speak his mind and nor, that night, would they. They brought saucepan lids, whistles, drums and firecrackers. The crowd filled Dam Square; they held their placards aloft. 'Headscarves off' one of them read. Though another said, 'Not in the name of my Islam.' And Pim Fortuyn's wax statue appeared at the top floor window of Madame Tussaud's and many of those near enough to notice it clamoured and cheered.

The night after that we too walked, with our brothers and sisters from Amsterdam and the surrounding areas, from the *Al-Kabir* mosque to the site of the filmmaker's death. We carried signs calling for

dialogue and for greater understanding. We wanted them to know that our skin crawled at the horror and hatred and narrowness of this crime, that his murder was in complete opposition to everything that the prophet asks of us. We wanted to mourn together with Amsterdam for the lost understanding between us. We hoped that the city was watching.

Afterwards, unable to sleep in an apartment building in a neighbouring town, I thought of the young man they had arrested for Van Gogh's murder. How dark his days must have been: searching for hate, and destruction, refusing to gather in community, refusing to talk with others who felt differently and then extolling the words of the prophet which rang sinister and hollow in the note he had left behind.

We knew this attack would affect us too. Our community, that wanted only to be a force for truth and good in the world, that wanted only this one small thing: a space to gather with our brothers and sisters and now, with this death – this murder – the dream of our mosque, on the edge of the dunes, seemed more distant still.

‘Excuse me,’ said a voice behind Nadia, as she returned home, crossing the square in front of her building as the light was falling. She turned. It was the man who sold flowers on the ground floor. ‘My supplier brought too many yellow ones.’ He held out a bunch of tulips so large he had to extend both hands to offer them. ‘I want you to have these.’

They were wrapped in waxy spring-green paper and tied with plastic ribbons that curled and bounced around his hands. She reached out to receive them. ‘Thank you,’ she said. He smiled more shyly now and then turned back towards his shop where he had left a customer waiting. Had he been watching for her to return, the flowers already wrapped ready to give to her? ‘*Zo mooi*,’ she ventured softly. But he was too far away to hear.

Nadia did not so much mind being alone as she once had – except when Youssef had to work late during Ramadan. It felt wrong to break the fast alone. When this happened she just ate a few dates, drank a little milk and went to bed, choosing to eat a little more in the morning when she woke, sluggish, but at least then she had Youssef’s company.

Perhaps tomorrow when the cleaning jobs were done she would treat herself to a film in the cinema on the ground floor of the adjacent apartment building. The cinema had plush seats and the air was scented with popcorn and sugar. During the day they showed old films. She liked the films they showed then – quieter than the ones Youssef liked to watch. Occasionally she found she had seen them before. *The Sound of Music, The Court Jester, Titanic*. The pleasure of this felt like the opposite of homesickness. It was like finding herself sitting inside a moment in the past: safe and warm. Often, though not, of course, during Ramadan, she would find a few coins and buy herself a small popcorn and this added to her pleasure. She had not yet told Youssef of this indulgence. She did not think he

would disapprove; it was only that when she'd tried to confess it, the words seemed foolish and she had stopped herself from speaking. It was self-indulgent nostalgia: a childhood treat recalled, the smell of street stalls and carnivals from a place much too far from here.

But first there were houses to clean and errands to run; it was only to fill the long empty days – longer when hungry, thirsty and often with a headache – until she could eat and drink again. Yes, she'd see a movie, if they were showing something tomorrow afternoon. And she would prepare the evening meal afterwards, before Youssef got home. He came home weary and distracted during Ramadan, so that she rarely even needed to evade a question about her activities of the day. Just smile and listen to his words roll out across the table. Nod and smile and reassure.

After the film she'd prepare some treats for Eid: *kaab el ghazal* and almond *briouats*. Youssef would appreciate some sweet pastries to celebrate the end of Ramadan and perhaps she'd take some to give to Mr Brandsma if she managed to see him this week – though this became less likely as the days got shorter and morning prayer later day by day – still, perhaps he would work from home one day – or return for his lunch break when she was there. It couldn't hurt to take a small gift to open up the communication between them.

Heico unlocked his bike and took the side streets. The autumn had a brightly decked melancholy: wet, windy and as cold as the winters of his childhood, yet the streets were ablaze with autumn colour and confectioners had filled their windows with chocolate acorns and marzipan mushrooms.

The stretch of almost-countryside between the office and home made him wonder about the people who lived in the waterlogged green strips that made up so much of the country's topography. What did these people think? The men and women who farmed the columns of land marked out by ditches and waterways, who watched the evening news in living rooms far back from the highways. Did they have mobile phones? The internet? Or did they live in what might as well be another country, woven in green stretches right through this one?

Eliza had been working from home and now she was watching television and still half working with her laptop on her lap. The public broadcasting company had announced that Pim Fortuyn had been voted the greatest Dutchman of all time by television viewers around the country. And now a panel of local celebrities on a panel rolled their eyes and numbered on their fingers: William of Orange, Erasmus, M.C. Escher and Anne Frank, much too late. Rembrandt, Johan Cruyff, they said. Vincent van Gogh. Tiësto, Freddy Heineken, Abel Tasman, Hieronymus Bosch. He wondered how much of it she could follow, how many of the people on the panel she recognized. He wanted to ask but they were both tired and he didn't want her to feel he was challenging her.

The result of the vote had been the topic of conversation in the tearoom at lunchtime and although the staff may have disagreed with the result, its sourness seemed to reflect the mood of everyone at the table. A feeling of futility hung over everything they were working on and as the days

shortened and the darkness claimed more of each day Heico sensed the grief, fear and exhaustion of those around him and there was nothing he could do for them. He had found himself thinking, not for the first time, that perhaps he was better off starting over down in De Biesbosch. He pictured himself out in the field, in a whole new environment: different conditions and species, and none of the talk about mosques.

Now the television was showing a re-run of Sinterklaas' arrival and it occurred to Heico that this is why Eliza had turned the television on. The man himself, bearded and decked out like a bishop, was waving from the deck of a steamboat surrounded by jumping, tumbling, black-faced Piets in bright, striped minstrel costumes. He winced. 'Why do you watch this stuff?'

'I'm interested.'

'It's the same every year.'

'Precisely,' she said.

He sighed and wiped down the bench. 'They're talking about having multi-coloured Piets next year.'

'But they won't.' She'd turned back to the screen and was watching as *Sint*'s white horse was readied for the great man's arrival.

She stood up and headed for the kitchen. 'What's this?' called Eliza a moment later from the pantry.

'In the paper? It was on the bench. I thought you'd bought it. Looks like some type of biscuit. Perhaps the cleaner…?'

'She's leaving us baked goods now?'

'Unless you know where else it's come from.'

She opened the package. 'Shall we have one?' She cut one of the crescent-shaped cookies into two pieces and placed the halves on two saucers. 'It's sweet of her, I guess.'

'It's Eid, I think – sugar feast.' He shrugged and pulled a flyer out of his briefcase. An artist's impression of the mosque with, ironically, a squabble of gulls poised in the air above it and a list of features the mosque would boast, many of which, the brochure claimed, would be open to the public:

a bookshop, a childcare centre, a health-care service aimed at women and parents of young children.

'They're ambitious,' he said frowning at the list. 'But still.'

'I'm not sure they'll get a lot of interest for the childcare. In a mosque.'

'Some of the families are quite large.'

'Would you send a child to a church to be minded?'

Heico touched his fingers briefly to his brow. A headache he hadn't paid attention to until now made itself felt behind his left eye. 'No, I guess not.' It didn't matter anyway. The projected success of their childcare program would have no bearing on the building itself.

'Mmm,' said Eliza having nibbled the corner of her pastry tentatively ahead of bring over the tea glasses and plates. 'This is pretty amazing. I have no idea what it is but…'

Heico sipped his tea before picking up the pastry and biting into it. She was right. The pastry was flaky and the filling a paste that was both floral and delicately spiced. Almond paste and orange flowers and cinnamon. 'This must taste pretty great after months of fasting.'

'Do you think Nadia made it?'

'I guess.'

Eliza leaned forward and reached for the paper package on the coffee table. 'I'm having more. You want one?'

'OK.'

She handed him a full crescent this time and she took one herself before crumpling the package closed as if forbidding herself further access. 'We should eat some real food,' she said, returning her attention to the figures on the television screen. After a pause she leaned her head to one side. 'If I left my shoe out, do you think there'd be treats in it in the morning?'

Heico smiled. 'I think it'd be worth a try.' He made a mental note to pick up sweets and chocolate coins with the groceries.

'Promise me you won't dress up like that.' She jabbed her finger towards the screen where the head Piet was being interviewed by a journalist from the evening news without apparent irony. His face was completely covered in black make-up and the structure of his features seemed strangely

out of place. The effect was eerie; she was right about that.

'Who's dressing up?' said Heico as the camera swung around to show a band of small children, themselves in miniature Piet costumes *sans* gloves, *sans* culturally questionable make-up, their eyes wide with anticipation.

She nodded slowly and he could hear the smile in her voice though she didn't look away from the screen. 'I think this year I'm going to give it a try.'

When Heico arrived at the pub Juliaan was flicking through a copy of *Elsevier* with a sour look on his face. Heico felt strangely pleased to see him, as if Juliaan was some sort of ally, when in reality he was just there to fill column inches. The magazine appeared to be dedicated to how Holland could 'work through' the assassination of Theo van Gogh and Juliaan flicked past interviews, with Cardinal Simonis, a young newsreader, and the Mayor of Amsterdam all weighing in.

'Your articles are making quite a splash,' said Heico.

Juliaan looked up from the magazine. 'They are?' He seemed momentarily pleased.

'They're all over the web. Our mapping images reproduced ...'

Juliaan frowned. 'No one mentioned anything to me. I can ask the editor.'

Heico sighed and sank into the chair opposite. He rubbed his forehead with his thumb and forefinger for a moment before looking up.

'I'll ask around,' said Juliaan.

Heico dipped his head to acknowledge this. Juliaan clearly didn't know anything about the articles his Google alert kept turning up.

'Another assassination,' Heico said by way of letting Juliaan temporarily off the hook.

'And this time it *was* a Muslim.'

'How did this become a country where assassinations happen?'

Juliaan closed his eyes for a moment as if thinking about it hurt him. 'I don't know.'

'You know with Volkert van der G., with the whole thing about "protecting society", do you think he was just trying to protect his real cause?'

'Animals? Fortuyn seems an odd target. Still.' Juliaan tipped his cup towards Heico and looked at him and then away. 'You'd be more likely to know the answer to that than me. Wageningen, the whole animal welfare scene – I assume these are your people.'

'Murderers?'

'Animal activists, I guess.' Juliaan held his coffee aloft and smiled an odd, lopsided smile. 'How far would you go for your cause?'

'The bird sanctuary? I wouldn't kill someone, if that's what you're asking.'

There was a misunderstood silence and both men drank avoiding each other's eyes.

Later, unlocking his bike, it occurred to Heico to wonder if he was in danger. Surely not, and yet, if there was some young gun at the community centre ... People had begun stopping Heico in the street, wanting to talk about the mosque plans. He didn't know how they knew who he was. If someone, young and angry, decided they didn't like what Heico was saying, wasn't he in exactly the same position as Van Gogh? Sure, he wasn't famous, but he had certainly made himself unpopular with the mosque advocates.

He imagined mentioning this thought to Eliza, imagined her laughing at his sense of his own importance, imagined her relating his irrational fears as a dinner party story to general hilarity. He imagined himself blushing and bumbling and launching in to a mildly-inflated account of all these months of tedious, low-level conflict and he knew he would be keeping this thought to himself.

Heico smiled to see Eliza's espadrille placed tidily in front of the television set. He took off his own shoes and placed one beside it. From his briefcase he took a magazine for each of them (for Eliza he had found an imported copy of *Vanity Fair*, only a little out of date) and two small bars of chocolate: hazelnut for her, dark for him. He rolled the magazines and inserted them into the shoes and slid the chocolate bars on top, then stood looking at the two shoes feeling disproportionately pleased. His oversized shoe next to her oddly summery selection, the little gifts and the thought of her feigned surprise tomorrow morning. He switched off the light and taking his other shoe, headed upstairs.

December 2004

<> Prince Bernhard dies. <> In a ground-breaking deal with an internet provider, Van Gogh's last film, 06/05, is released direct to the internet. <> A radio appeal for Darfur collects 717,000 euro. <> A massive tsunami claims three hundred thousand lives in Asia.<>

The Christmas party was more modest than in previous years. A cocktail function with free-flowing alcohol but no real food, so that only a sandwich, eaten hours before at his desk, buffered the effects of the drinking and seasonal frivolity. Heico thought their office was too small for a Christmas party. He had suggested, several times, that they should travel to The Hague, and have a proper dinner and a chance to see their colleagues. The local party felt ridiculous. Everyone half dressed up, the smell of hair spray in the bathrooms, but no one's formalwear and fresh make-up was fooling anyone and there was nothing much to say: they were still the same people that they worked with every day.

Onno, Heico's boss, had come up on the train. He stood on the periphery with a heavy-bottomed glass of something over ice and watched everyone with a supervisory eye.

Best to speak to him early in the night, thought Heico. He ordered a beer, and took his drink over to stand beside Onno, watching the staff eyeing each other and clumping in spacious circles.

'I recognise fewer faces every year,' his boss said.

Heico gestured with his hand at a group at the edge of the dance floor. 'The doctoral fellows. A couple are new this year.' He looked around the room: dim light, the staff just beginning to let the

alcohol do its work, their faces showing the first traces of carelessness. ‘The rest you know, I think.’

Onno nodded unconvincingly.

‘We’ve had a good year, all things considered,’ said Heico.

‘Mmm,’ said Onno. He swirled the liquid in his glass for a moment. ‘Do me a favour,’ he said. Heico turned to face him. ‘Focus more on publications and less on the city skyline.’

‘But …’ said Heico.

‘Just publish something. It gives you credibility and then you can dabble in town planning and whatever else you like.’

‘It isn’t “dabbling in town planning.” They want to build a major religious building on the block adjacent to the bird sanctuary.’

‘And?’

Heico wondered why they always appointed policy people to Onno’s job. For once he’d like to see a scientist in that role. ‘And, it affects migratory paths.’

‘It’s one building.’

‘It’s a building that doesn’t exist yet. It could go anywhere.’

‘Well, fine. It’s fine for you to be advising on this, just don’t let it derail the grant applications and don’t forget to publish. Do you want to be stuck in this office forever?’

The question struck him as a strange one. Was Onno trying to get rid of him?

‘You’re a good scientist,’ said Onno. ‘Not a great one, but a good one.’

‘I guess,’ said Heico. The beer was more bitter than he’d expected.

‘Science is a certain type of truth,’ said Onno. ‘There are others. If that wasn’t true, science would rule the world – but it doesn’t. You should think about the ministry. Or NGOs. There are environmental groups who would clamour to have you.’

Heico grimaced. ‘I’m not vegetarian.’

Onno smiled and looked at the ground. ‘Think about it. Or academia – if it’s the research you like.’

‘I don’t think I’m ministry material.’

‘Well the universities won’t even look at you if your publication record isn’t up to scratch.’

Heico’s beer was still mostly full. He wished he’d thought to come over with a half-empty glass. ‘Well, I should be talking to ...’ he gestured vaguely into the room.

‘I’m serious,’ said Onno. ‘No one’s role is guaranteed here.’

Was it a threat? A warning? ‘I’ll bear it in mind. It has been a while I suppose.’ Actually his last proper publication had been co-authored by his Masters supervisor. He inclined his torso slightly towards Onno, a strange bow of submission. ‘I should be ...’ he gestured at the room again.

‘Of course,’ said Onno, dismissing him with one hand.

Heico headed for the table that held the paltry bar snacks. He ate a handful of nuts and then picked up the bowl and took it with him to offer to the Operations Manager on secondment from Fisheries.

‘You know, I was in Spain in the summer. Costa Brava, nice hotel. And we saw this bird – I’ve been wondering what it was. Dark brown and with a wing-span,’ he spread his hands in front of him to indicate ‘We weren’t close but it seemed like it would’ve been maybe this wide.’

Heico smiled weakly at him. ‘Did you take a photo?’

‘No, but I could have watched it for hours.’

‘There are the field guides.’ Heico point in the direction of the sets they kept for the volunteer-run birding tours that would start again in April. ‘Or there are online tools now.’

Adalbert nodded, disappointed. ‘I hear you’re working on the mosque project.’ He had the air of someone easing in to a favourite topic.

‘It’s not exactly a “project”,’ said Heico.

‘Aren’t you rather “tilting at windmills” with this?’

Heico raised an eyebrow.

‘They’ll build it. Of course they will. From what I understand, the city council’s chaffing at the bit for it. Did you see the interview with the Mayor in the paper a few months ago? He thinks a mosque would make the area seem progressive and “future-ready.”’

Heico hadn’t seen the interview. He gestured non-commitally with the nuts.

'Let them have their mosque, I say. Better that they're praying than blowing something up.'

Heico grimaced. 'It's not about just "yes" or "no." We really need a national framework for dealing with these matters: some guidelines on who to consult and a checklist of matters to consider. In this case –'

Adalbert shrugged. 'Better to focus on the big picture – don't you think – rather than national policies? I mean: we're part of Europe for a start.' His eyes were glassy. 'I say: let them have their five prayers a day, let them keep their women shrouded, their angry young men. What difference does it make to us?'

'The problem is their "angry young men" are now our angry young men. Most have Dutch nationality.' This was Martin from HR, leaning in to lend his opinion. He wanted to talk about destruction of public property and the burden on the justice system. He was worried about values, he said, and the decline of social norms.

'Surely the whole integration project is doomed,' he said. 'We all know it. They can't adapt or they don't want to. Their religion forbids it, that's why it's called Sharia *Law,* so why are we tinkering on the edges with talk about headscarves and halal food when the point is they lock up their women and stone adulterers.'

'Well, the second generation secularises,' conceded Aadelbert.

'Or they radicalise. The kids get riled up by old men at the mosque who want to send them home to fight – these are kids who never knew any home but Lelystad or Almere.'

Martin glanced at Heico for support.

'My opinion's an ecological one. It's about the building itself.'

Martin seemed disappointed by this but was willing to pick up the thread. 'That's right, and now here they are wanting to bulldoze what's left of the green space in this part of the country for a building no one wants here, despite the legitimate concerns of local scientists.' Here he indicated Heico and then Aadelbert, who was neither a scientist nor involved – even peripherally – in the matter.

'Quite right,' said Aadelbert, nodding. 'Quite right.'

As Martin launched into an anecdote he'd heard from a friend who lived near the mosque in

Rotterdam Heico pulled back, smiled and turned from them without excusing himself, the bowl of nuts still in his hand, and looked for another conversation to join.

Later, after Onno had left to catch the last train, Imogen – leaning against a wall twirling an empty wine glass in her hands – confided to Heico that she felt lonely now. Someone had died, he recalled. She had taken a few days off to go to the funeral and be with her family. Her grandmother, perhaps? He didn't remember and it would be awkward, now, to ask. She looked good. She had dressed up like it was a real party – in a dark purple dress that sparkled as she moved and she'd done something different with her hair so that it sat high on her head.

'You know,' she said to Heico and she bit her lip for a moment before continuing, 'you're the best boss I've ever had.'

They found themselves in her doorway. She shared an apartment with a girl who stayed with her boyfriend a lot. The intimacy of suddenly being in her private space was a shock. The smell of her was all around him: it breathed out from the coat rack and engulfed him on the couch.

'I should get us something to drink,' she said. And she disappeared into the kitchen.

He wanted to sleep. That was his impulse as soon as she left the room: he wanted to stretch out on her couch and sleep. Of course it would be rude. He could hear her clattering around in the next room. Of course she would never forgive him; she would tell the girls in the office at one of those lunches they slipped away for on Friday afternoons. He could just let himself out the front door. But that wasn't the way of things in the real world. People who came home with people from office Christmas parties didn't disappear out the front door without warning. Sex was a simpler, politer course of action with, it seemed to him then, less adverse consequences. He stayed, sitting abruptly upright, waiting for her to return.

When she reappeared she did not have any drinks with her. 'My housemate forgot to fill the ice tray.' She held out her hands, helpless.

He swallowed. His mind groping in the alcohol-fog for what came next. His mouth felt

unnaturally dry. ‘I’m not really thirsty,’ he said.

She perched on one high-heel and raised her other foot to remove her shoe and drop it, with exaggerated ceremony, to the floor. She reminded him of a heron. Unipedal resting. For an instant he thought of storing this detail up to relate to Eliza.

Imogen switched legs, as if it was part of a pre-rehearsed dance, and removed the second shoe, but rather than dropping it, she continued to hold it in front of her body as if they were about negotiate for it. ‘We should ...’ She bent double, like Audubon’s flamingo, to place the shoe next to its pair.

Heico looked down at his feet. His own shoes seemed unnaturally large and somehow too close. He felt no desire to remove them. On the contrary it suddenly felt important that he leave them on, as if his shoes were some type of armour without which he would find himself vulnerable and quite possibly defeated. He stood, stumblingly, his body weight pitching forward but he managed to right himself – somehow – and watched Imogen turn towards her bedroom. ‘I’m sorry,’ he managed, ‘I have to go.’

She said something he didn’t hear. His ears were ringing and the sounds of her apartment seemed distant. He blundered to the front door without looking back, fumbled with the door handle and thrust himself out into the world, grateful, almost gasping as if he had been holding his breath inside. He had to get home. It was the only thing that mattered.

Outside, the cold air reminded him of his jacket still slung over the back of her cardinal red couch. He checked his pants pocket: he still had his keys, thankfully. His shoes, from feeling necessary and indispensible, now felt so heavy he could barely move. He wanted to run but instead he plodded, heavily, certain Imogen was watching him from a darkened window, plotting her revenge for the insult of his inelegant exit. But he had to get home – to Eliza, to his life – he had to escape the path he had almost taken and already regretted. If he could just make it to the stairwell he knew he’d be OK. He just needed to be on his bike, on his way through the freezing night air – burning at his skin until he was cleansed of this almost-sin. He wanted very badly to be home.

Heico dreamed of a tent in the desert. At first he was alone and then Eliza was saying ‘I will get the camel’ and she rose and left and the cleaner came in because it was morning and they had given her the key. She was swathed in black fabric and she moved around the space but her clothing kept knocking things over. She didn’t seem to be cleaning so much as sweeping objects on to the floor. Heico stood to abraid her but then the phone rang and it was his mother. She had a recipe that called for finch, she said, did he know where she could get some? And Juliaan was there, taking notes, so Heico, who had been wondering if he had any finch in the freezer, told his mother to ask her butcher if he could get squab and she said: is that the same? And he said: no but life’s not easy, and hung up the phone.

Youssef spoke often about his father.

'Baba's always saying "I came here for you," but that's not true. He came here for his own reasons. And now he rarely leaves the neighbourhood and when he does he comes home with a headache and complains about what the girls wear and how slow the trains are.'

Or: 'Baba wants us to be happy and successful and to raise good, obedient, Muslim children. But those children will be Dutch. They will want to choose things for themselves. What if they want to be Hindus or Jews or join a circus or work in a strip club or join a mixed swimming team?'

This type of talk made Nadia feel lightheaded. She felt as if, inevitably, her life here would lead to this: she would live in a darkened house, alone, and someone would bring her a tray of lukewarm food and they would ask where she came from and she would say: it does not matter now, that was a long time ago. And they would nod and say: see you next time. They would tell each other that she has lovely skin. They are always talking about her skin – the women whose houses she cleans. They reach out towards her with soft fingers but she draws back from them and watches their faces fall. 'I only wanted ...' And as she turns to her next task, they slip away to another room.

Nadia was dusting the row of dark-wood candle holders in the front window when a car parked directly in front of the house and a man – perhaps in his thirties or early forties – sprang energetically out and then bent for a moment to retrieve something he had left in the car. This was him then, Heico Brandsma? Her heart beat hard in her chest and she drew back, cloth in hand, so that she might watch him a little longer before he noticed her, where she stood now swiping lightly at a coffee table she had already dusted. The man was tall and his gait purposeful, his eyes hooded. He did not glance through

the front window as he passed but proceeded to the front door where, to her surprise, he rang the bell. Not Mr Brandsma then.

She swallowed. She did not like to answer the door when alone in people's homes but standing in the front room she could not easily avoid it. The moment he glanced to his left he would see her. She laid down her cloth, touched her fingers to her temples to check her *hijab* was secure and went to the front door.

'*Kan ik u helpen*?' The shop-assistants' phrase was familiar from the lessons but she was not sure if she was going to be able to understand his response.

'*Hij is getrouwd met een…*' The man's eyes were wild and this exclamation was not addressed to her but to the unpredictable universe.

Nadia suppressed the anger that had seized her. 'I'm not Mr Brandsma's wife.'

The man flushed. 'Of course. The cleaner!' He seemed relieved and somehow proud of himself at the same time, order restored to his world view. He stood looking at her a moment more and then handed her an unmarked yellow envelope. 'Please give this to Heic–, Mr Brandsma. Tell him it's a contribution. He'll understand. There's a note. It's for his campaign.'

Nadia reached out and took the envelope. He kept looking at her and then behind her as if talking to someone else.

'I'll give it to him,' she said and inclined her head to avoid having to make eye contact any longer. '*Bedankt*,' she said and she closed the door though he stood there still.

Heico still fed the winter birds in the yard as his grandfather had shown him when he was a child: peanut butter mixed with a handful of seed, a bowl of ice-chips so they could get a little water when the canals were frozen. Woolf would sometimes bark at the birds through the back window, but mostly he ignored them.

Heico laid the food and crushed ice on the feeder outside the back window and then wrapped his arms around himself. Someone had apparently slipped an anonymous 'contribution' through the letter slot in the front door a few days ago. Heico had dropped the cash – several new one-hundred euro notes – on to the bench as soon as he read the note, as if he was afraid of being caught with it. Even now he hadn't figured out what to do with it, so had just stuffed it all back in the envelope as quickly as he could and thrown it in the bottom drawer. There was no way to return it: he didn't know where it had come from. Should he take it to the police? What were they supposed to do with it? He could use it for the volunteer guides – buy them Christmas gifts or something. But he knew that wasn't what the money was for.

'Where's your jacket?' Eliza called from inside. They were running late for her theatre group's Christmas party.

'Left it at the office.' Heico felt sick at this lie but telling the truth was out of the question.

Eliza sighed as he came in through the back door. 'Why don't you just go back for it?'

'The building's closed. I think there's an old one in the attic.' He headed up the stairs to look.

In the car, on the way, Heico said: 'I've been thinking about that job in the South. The Biesbosch.'

She looked across at him.

'If I leave, no one will follow up the mosque thing and before you know it…' He had turned the idea over in his mind obsessively for the last few days. He played a game where he allowed himself to forget the work he was doing here, to just focus on the new challenges – how much good he'd be able to do in the wetlands. They had nothing like his office there. If they could secure on-going funding there was so much they could do and it was such an important area, not just for birds.

But somehow he couldn't let himself off the hook. There was a reason Juliaan had come to him with the mosque story. There was a reason he had persisted with his interest in the development even when everyone wanted him to just let it go – they needed him here. Not the people, but the birds.

The party occupied multiple floors of a canal house that leaned precariously out over the *Lauriergracht*. A clutch of women clustered around a salon table on the ground floor. One of them had a laugh like the honk of a migrating goose and she seemed to find every comment her neighbour made hysterically funny.

'Our leading lady,' said Eliza seeing him watching her. Now he remembered her as Eva Peron in October, arguing with a second-rate President Juan in a dressing room that might have been designed by Dreamtime Barbie. 'Don't take your coat off,' said Eliza, taking him by the wrist. She shepherded him through a hallway past an ornate wooden table, and up a narrow flight of stairs. Eliza waved him past a feather-bedecked women who appeared to be waiting for the bathroom.

'Stairs,' she said, behind him and he turned onto the second and then third flight until he reached a door that opened on to a roof terrace bordered by a low brick wall on three sides and by a step gable on the fourth.

'Here she is!' said a man in black, lunging towards Eliza to kiss her. The director, Heico remembered, of a show they'd done where each actor delivered their lines in their own native tongue resulting in an incomprehensible, tedious evening, though the cast themselves seemed elated at the after party – as if they'd somehow built a real world tower of Babel and scaled it, unhindered by their linguistic and cultural differences. 'A triumph!' he remembered this guy repeating at regular intervals that night. 'An absolute triumph!'

'Come,' the director included Heico in his gesture now – we've just opened a very good Beaujolais – I know it's not the season but.' He herded them across to where a group of half-familiar faces huddled in jackets cradling plastic cups in a circle of folding chairs.

'It's cold,' Heico said.

'Yes, but the view…' they gestured out over the canal to the houses and rooftops beyond.

'I only wish we were higher,' someone said. And someone else leaned over and offered her something from her handbag. 'No,' she said. 'No. Higher up.'

The group bunched up and somehow a bench materialized for Eliza and Heico to sit on.

'I love your jacket, man,' the director said to Heico. 'Proper retro.'

He brought them real glasses and poured them almost full of red wine.

Eliza frowned. 'We drove,' she said. 'We can't drink much.'

'You didn't both drive,' the director said.

'I'll drive home,' said Heico and the director slapped him on the back so that the wine in his glass sloshed wildly towards the rim.

'You remind me of someone, you know? I've always thought so.'

This seemed to be intended as a compliment, so Heico smiled.

'You're the bird guy, yeah?'

The director's conversational technique reminded Heico of birds that pulsed between a flurry of wing beats, dipping briefly in rest followed by another flurry to pull them aloft again.

The director sat down heavily on a sun lounger and closed his eyes.

Beside Heico a very tall girl was describing a cello to a man who appeared to have come straight from work. She sculpted the air into voluptuous curves to demonstrate.

'Oh yes, I think I know. And you play at the *Concertgebouw*, you said?' Though it was the weekend, he wore a suit and tie and now had a fluffy blanket clasped around his shoulders.

Heico smiled at her. She looked at him blankly. 'You performed the Messiah?' Heico asked.

Her face lit now. 'You saw it?'

'No. But I heard it was wonderful.' He had heard nothing other than that it was on. This from

Juliaan who had mentioned in passing that he and his boyfriend planned to go.

'Yes, well, the visiting conductor, he's from Ukraine: he is very driven.'

'The Messiah?' said the suit 'The one with all the Halleluiahs?'

She nodded to confirm this.

'Do people still want to …' he tailed off and took a gulp from a large bottle he had sitting beside his chair.

'Anyway,' she said, 'the conductor refused to work with our usual soprano because she was an atheist.'

'Is that legal?' said the man.

'He said he couldn't have an atheist singing 'I know that my Redeemer liveth' – that no one would believe it. And then he checked the other soloists too. Luckily the alto was some sort of Dutch reformed, I don't know if she is exactly devout but –'

'Is that legal?' repeated the man.

'He said it was essential to the authenticity of the work,' said the musician. 'I suppose…'

'Isn't that like insisting the actors who play Romeo and Juliet are really in love?'

She reflected for a moment. 'I guess for actors it is their job to act. For singers, not necessarily.' She waved her hand towards him in a conciliatory move. 'His soprano – her performances have people in tears so …'

'Well,' said the man. 'I don't think it's legal.'

The girl shrugged. 'You should come and see it,' she said and she met Heico's eyes with a look that indicated that she did not mean to include the suit in the invitation.

The intensity of her gaze brought on a rush of guilt.

'My wife,' Heico gestured towards Eliza sitting beside him. Eliza turned towards him and he did not know how to complete the sentence. 'My wife likes music too,' he said. Eliza smiled sympathetically at his companions and returned to her own conversation.

Heico glanced around for a bottle to refill his glass before remembering he had volunteered to drive. 'I think I'll find a bathroom,' he said, and he stood smoothing his hands down his jeans. 'It's

quite cold isn't it?'

In the hallways people looked at him strangely. Outside the bathroom someone said: 'You're Eliza's husband, the bird guy. With the mosque?'

Heico nodded. He was surprised that Eliza spoke about his work with her theatre friends.

'You know,' said the man, 'it would be easier if they just stayed where they were.' His eyes were red and puffy. 'Fucking Muslims,' he said and his companion looked at him with shock. 'Let them fuck up their own country – we don't want all that here.'

His companion was all but holding her hand over his mouth. 'He's fucked up,' she said. 'He doesn't know what he's saying.'

'This guy agrees with me.' He pointed at Heico. 'This guy knows.'

The woman smiled at Heico. 'I'm sorry,' she said.

'HE FUCKING AGREES.' The man was lunging towards him now. 'It's Christmas! Next year we'll probably be celebrating Ramadan – with lemonade and bowls of rice or whatever.' His companion managed to distract him for a moment, but once Heico was in the bathroom he could hear him yelling about Black Piet being banned because the Muslims don't like it. And Santa Claus.

'His kid's at a public school,' the woman told Heico when he emerged. 'He's not usually like this.'

All the schools were public, weren't they? It didn't matter. None of it mattered.

'His kid,' she said again.

'Yeah,' said Heico, and headed back up to the roof.

'What was that about?' said Eliza.

Could they have heard all of that, from out here? 'The mosque.'

Eliza rolled her eyes. 'They want to build a mosque,' she filled her circle in, 'out near us. Heico doesn't want it next to the dunes because of the bird sanctuary there. You wouldn't believe the ridiculous …'

Heico had the impulse to slap her to make her stop talking. He grabbed the stool beneath him to restrain his hand. He was shocked at himself. He'd never wanted to do that before. There was a

terrible taste in his mouth. It was like he didn't know who he was anymore.

The director touched his arm. He spoke conspiratorially. '*I* heard a story about a bird the other day. From that film.'

Heico nodded, grateful to be pulled away from the conversation, and the director launched into what was apparently an allegory taken from a recent film. '…And the bird dies in the night from the cold!' the director concluded blearily, as if he has delivered a punch line of some significance.

'Right,' Heico said and smiled obligingly before wondering aloud if there were more drinks downstairs. They could always get a taxi if they had to. He could pick the car up tomorrow. The director shrugged and slumped back into the sun lounger. Heico stood up. He missed his jacket; this one was too thin and too tight around the arms. Still, under the circumstances, he knew he deserved to be cold.

When he got back with a few beers that he'd found downstairs, Eliza was still talking about the mosque. 'And now we have people dropping "anonymous contributions" off at our home address!'

So she had found the envelope and read the note. She hadn't mentioned it. Why hadn't she spoken to him about this if it bothered her? He knew the answer to this. The same reason he hadn't mentioned it to her when he'd first found it at the front door. The topic was too fraught, too likely to lead them into difficult territory.

The willowy cello player was looking at Heico disappointedly, as if he had turned out to be someone other than who she thought. Probably he was. Perhaps he was over-tired. 'If they build it somewhere else …' he said.

Being misunderstood churned his gut. His shoulder muscles cramped against the injustice of her judgement but there was no way to turn this around now: everyone here had had too much to drink. He allowed the acid of their opinions to sink through his body. Here was the same as work.. Somehow, even there, no one seemed to understand. Give up, their bodies said, if not their words – their half-shrugs and minimal engagement with the issue when he tabled it for staff meetings.

'Do what you have to, but don't drag the minister into it,' Loes from HR had said to him on

the phone a few days ago. Whether this was a warning or a threat Heico did not know. He had not intended to use the minister's name or office to further his cause. This was a local matter and he had made no attempt to contact her about this, or indeed about any matter ever, so why Loes had thought it necessary to make a special appointment to call him with this pronouncement was a mystery to him. She'd sent him an emailed meeting request with a generic HR-style meeting title 'staffing' and he'd accepted the request and set aside an hour but the phone call had run for four minutes. She had not asked him to explain, barely given him a chance to speak at all. 'That's all I called for,' she'd said, her voice falsely bright in conclusion – perhaps glad to have dispensed with an unpleasant item from her 'to do' list. He could almost hear her pencil run through it as she spoke the words. Heico, caught off guard by the abrupt and premature ending of a discussion he prepared entirely the wrong material for, had muttered something polite in response and then she was gone with an abrupt click. When he'd replaced the receiver his neck and shoulders were sore.

'You're right,' someone on the other side of the circle was saying. 'There are mosques everywhere now. There's one a few streets over from us. Honestly, it's not all prayer that goes on in those places – they teach their children things you wouldn't believe. The tiny little ones. They don't even learn Dutch.'

Heico sighed. He let the group respond to this or brush over it. The director had fallen asleep on the sun-lounger, an empty wine bottle lay next to him. Heico thought of how the engineers could reverse the direction of the Amstel, so that the whole river flowed the other way. He wondered why no one ever talked about things like that at parties.

A farmer finds a tiny bird, freezing in the snow. He drops it into a pile of fresh cow dung to save its life and continues on his way. As the bird warms up it begins to sing. A little while later another man is passing by and hears the bird cheeping. He looks down and sees the bird and feels sorry for it, so rescues it from the cow dung.

The bird dies in the night from the cold.

The moral of this tale is threefold.

First: not everyone who drops you in shit is your enemy. Second: not everyone who rescues you from the shit is doing you a favour. And third: if you're happy in your own pile of shit, keep your mouth shut.

In the morning, when they woke with dry mouths and aching heads Eliza said: 'You've got to stop with the mosque and birds and everything.'

He closed his eyes. He wanted to sink back into sleep until the nausea had passed.

'It's not a work thing anymore. You're doing it for your own reasons and everyone knows it. Walk away. Give it to Claartje. This is costing you too much.'

He thought for a moment. Onno would be happy with this solution too no doubt. Claartje could attend the meetings and liaise with Juliaan and Heico could turn his attention to the projects for next year.

But the sanctuary wasn't there for humans to do what they pleased with; it was reserved space. The irony of the thought made him grimace: the sanctuary was sacred. It couldn't be compromised and he knew that Claartje would very likely sit through the meetings bored and resentful of the tedium endured for the sake of civic engagement. He couldn't hand it over to someone who didn't care how it ended. This mattered. The sanctuary mattered and the birds – their habitat, the soundscape, the number of people using the land, driving past, flicking cigarette butts into the undergrowth – all of it mattered.

'Claartje would let it slide. She doesn't care like I do.'

'Exactly!'

He wanted Eliza to be happy, to be proud of the work he did and – this had gone on so long now – he wanted her to think this was something worth spending his time on. More than anything right now he wanted her to look at him the way she used to: like she still believed that in his own small way he really was saving the world.

'I can't.'

Eliza sighed. The face she pulled made him feel ill. 'I know,' she said. 'I know.'

Eliza went out to walk the dog on Sunday night. Heico had offered to come, but she said she liked the solitude of the streets after dark. He suspected that she also liked to leave him with the dishes but tonight when she got back, earlier than was her usual habit, the dishes were still on the table.

Eliza dumped her keys on the kitchen bench. 'What's with all the menorahs? Every neighbour seems to have decided they're Jewish.'

'The candles in the windows? I think they're meant to be for Christmas – sort of.'

'It makes me angry. Jump-on-board-Judaism.'

'I'm not sure most people know the difference. I would have thought you'd like it.'

Eliza raised her eyebrows in disdain. 'Let Christians turn their own celebrations into Santa-worship. I'd rather they didn't start on the Jewish ones.'

'You've got a Christmas tree. God, eighteen months ago you hadn't been to a synagogue in years.'

Eliza slumped against the kitchen bench. 'Forget it, I'm sorry I mentioned it.' Eliza had wanted to be back home by now. She said she wanted to see friends and a show and go shopping. As if these things weren't possible here.

'If it's such a problem, why doesn't the Rabbi just ask everyone to take them down?'

'What? Go door to door?'

'In the newspaper I guess.'

'Maybe the Rabbi doesn't mind.'

'Then honestly ...'

She swivelled her body to face him 'So, not content to be the household that single-handedly sabotages the plans for a mosque –'

'Single-handedly – what?'

'– now we are the only house in the street not burning an electric menorah in the window, despite the fact that we are very likely the only actual Jewish household in the street! And we're OK with it because the Rabbi hasn't taken out a newspaper advertisement to object.'

'We're a Jewish household now?'

'Of course we are!'

'Lizzy ...' By reflex he used the placating tone that worked on his mother but that he knew Eliza hated.

She looked at him with electric eyes.

'What's this really about?' The question left them in dangerous territory, whether she chose to answer him or not. He half closed his eyes in anticipation of her reaction but there was only silence and then a sigh.

'Nothing,' she said and she leaned down to release the dog from his leash. She kissed Woolf on the head as she did this, a habit that bothered him, but not enough to raise it with her. 'Let's drop it. Woolf has had his walk, the street's turned Jewish – what do we care?'

Heico sometimes wished she would just stop talking long enough for him to be able to think what it was that he thought. She always had so many words.

Heico bent to stroke Woolf. 'He's bleeding.'

'What?' Eliza bent down again to look.

'How did you not know?'

'He didn't even whimper. It's only a scratch. Must've been a stone.'

Heico went to get a cloth, dampened it with warm water and returned, kneeling again to wash the dog's fur and stroke him behind the ears. He spoke softly in a voice that excluded his wife.

Eliza sighed again and walked away, returning after a moment with a book, which she took to the couch to read. 'I've had enough of the weekend now. Bring on Monday.'

The Mayor glanced around to check someone was taking the minutes.

'If the formalities are in order?' He surveyed the room as if there was somewhere else he would rather be and had every intention of heading there just as soon as he could wrap this up. 'Heico,' he said, without glancing at the meeting's agenda, 'we thought we'd ask you – in broad strokes – to refresh us on the dangers posed to the birds in the area and then after that we'd like to hear from Rita on the War-grave concerns.' He nodded down the conference table towards a woman wearing reading glasses on a cord around her neck. The Mayor sat down heavily in his place. 'Just broad strokes, you understand, so that we have the major issues sketched out.'

This was not what Heico had been expecting. In fact, for the last several meetings the councillors had largely ignored him. He had made a point of always making sure he got a small reminder of his concerns noted in the minutes to make sure the birds weren't altogether forgotten. He looked across at Peter for confirmation he could speak and with his nod Heico cleared his throat and began sketching out the broad facts of the bird migration trends, noting the most vulnerable species, before once again glancing at the Mayor who waved for him to continue. He swallowed then and relaxed into his topic, raising the Hoopoe project and his hopes that the area would become Europe's key centre for studying this bird and a handful of other migratory species. He noted the partner research centres he was working with and his hopes to recruit more young researchers and to attract funding for postdoctoral fellowships.

'Thank you,' said the Mayor when he concluded. 'That sounds like a very interesting project with a lot of potential for the area.' Peter echoed this enthusiasm with an appreciative murmur and much nodding.

Heico felt somewhat off balance. 'I can send some material to the office, if you are interested,' he said.

The Mayor nodded. 'Yes, of course, send us the information. We are very concerned with these types of issues at the moment. As well, of course, as attracting employment opportunities for young people to the area. Send it through for sure.' He smiled a strange, unnatural smile.

Heico began to lower himself into his chair.

Peter cleared his throat. ‘Mr Brandsma, you’ve been very persistent in attending these meetings.’

Peter seemed to expect a response to this so Heico nodded. ‘It’s been an issue we have been concerned with since the application was brought to our attention.’

‘Can you tell us, have there been any changes since your office first submitted its concerns to council?’ Peter looked at him meaningfully.

Heico wasn’t sure what they wanted from him.

‘How are bird numbers this year for example?’

‘Our surveys suggest that numbers of some selected species have declined while a handful of others–’

‘I see, and would you say that this decline was related to –’

‘It’s probably a normal fluctuation reflecting small variabilities in the weather,’ said Heico. ‘It would be hard to draw larger conclusions from our small data set.’

‘If I may?’ said Najib and reluctantly Peter gave him a nod to continue.

‘I think the elephant in the room here is Theo van Gogh’s assassination.’ A dismissive murmur was heard from one of the councillors at the top of the table. Najib looked across at Peter who pulled a frog-like face, impossible for the note-taker to record in the minutes. Najib shifted his attention to the Mayor, who appeared to be busy with his papers.

Feeling the weight of the room’s attention on him the Mayor looked up and then waved his hand impatiently. ‘Let’s press on. We have an update from the historical society. Rita, if you would?’

Rita stood in her place. It was evident that she had been waiting some time for an opportunity like this and she launched into a pre-prepared recap of the history of the water catchment area – both in terms of its role in capturing Amsterdam’s drinking water and the area’s role in the War.

Heico’s thoughts drifted to the office. He imagined the senior staff had congregated – in his absence – to exchange post-Christmas party gossip. He did not think that Imogen would have broadcast news of their encounter, but still he sensed that people knew. Heico had made a mistake and the circling careerists would have noted this lapse; it was only a matter of time before one would

swoop in and strike.

Rita concluded her speech with a turn to the imam to deliver a statement of the historical society's keen interest in supporting the 'goals of our newest neighbours and fellow countrymen while upholding the prime importance of maintaining and promoting the historical importance of the existing heritage values and honouring the living memories of our forebears, especially those who gave their lives' etc. This had clearly been scripted and carefully memorised and the imam smiled a tolerant, appreciative smile and nodded a long slow nod in response but did not say anything. Finally Rita nodded her thanks to the Mayor and took her place.

At this point the Muslim delegation began to murmur among themselves and the Mayor, who had so far completely ignored the agenda his staff had circulated ahead of time, now reached for a copy near him in order to move proceedings forward.

'I know the timing is unfortunate,' it was the actor again. 'The assassination has made things more difficult for all of us, but this is an opportunity: we can demonstrate what can be done with peaceful dialogue and cooperation….' Najib glanced around the table for support.

The Mayor sighed theatrically. 'We are all doing our best, under difficult circumstances, but…' he trailed off and Heico assumed that he meant to leave the impression that this mosque was the least of his concerns and the city council was currently besieged by innumerable applications for unpopular projects and he was simply trying to maintain a certain even-handedness in the midst of an avalanche of difficult requests.

'The young man's right,' said the imam. 'We can set an example for the country of how well this can work – despite our differences,' he nodded at Rita, who seemed uncomfortable with this and looked down into her notes. 'Despite the various concerns of our communities, there is no reason in the end that this can't work out for everyone.'

This speech appeared to unsettle the Mayor. 'I think that we have heard some things today that might give us pause before approving a major building project in this particular area. And, yes, the assassination is not an irrelevant factor in all of this. Can you imagine how the public would react if today we gave approval for…? Well anyway. We will take these things back with us, to look at

more carefully. The history, the environment, the diverse needs of our community. No doubt we will be able to come to some conclusions that will work in the best interests of everyone and,' he tilted his head, 'which we can stand behind in the long run. I think we would all be sorry, if in the end, because of hasty decision making, we lived to regret the plans we've all spent so long working towards.'

The vagueness of his message landed in the centre of the table with an obscure finality.

'So, if the notes are in order?'

The young woman taking the notes nodded hastily though she was still furiously scribbling as he spoke.

'Well then, I think we can leave this here for the moment. Can we set a time for a final meeting and decision making in the new year?'

This was addressed to Peter who made no effort to check this or to propose a particular date but only shrugged and nodded.

'Excellent,' said the Mayor. 'Excellent.' He stood up in his place. 'And thank you to Rita and Heico for those insights. We will certainly be taking your concerns back to our advisory team and looking at them very carefully.' He nodded at the note taker but she did not look up. 'Well then, I think that's all for today.'

There were some frustrated murmurs from the Muslim elders who appeared to be conducting a brief conference among themselves, but the representatives of the city council had said all they were planning to say. 'If there's no other business ...?' said the Mayor nodding to the room in parting, 'I'm afraid I have to be elsewhere.'

Of course, thought Heico, anywhere but here.

The Mayor turned to leave and Peter shuffled after him.

Those still in the room looked to the young woman who took the notes to see what came next. She blushed. 'Perhaps there is coffee,' she said into her notebook. 'Let me find out.'

It was late afternoon, too late to bother retuning to the office, so Heico decided to stop by the mosque site on his way home instead.

The sun dipped low and the light glowed pink across the snow on the ground so that the air seemed to hum with muted light. He could hear the low *tuck, tuck, tuck* of the blackbird before it appeared, flying low across the ground and flicking its tail upright as he landed.

Heico had not always liked the winter here. He remembered the first winter after he started high school. Schoolyard bullies rubbing fistfuls of powdered snow into his face with war cries that he couldn't understand while an accomplice jammed a wad of slush down his jeans. Later they would point out the damp patch to other kids as they lined up for class saying, 'Seems like Heico's had an accident.' After school they would cut him off on his ride home, force him off his bike and reprise the performance using the salted slush that lined the road.

Now he liked the feeling of winter's arrival, the seasons' turn, turn, turn. The late afternoon light was all around and falling and a moment later, as he headed for home, it had almost completely leached into the silent horizon.

Nadia rose early, well before the morning prayer. Classes began before first light now. The classroom had no external windows so it wasn't until the coffee break, when the class streamed into the cafeteria for coffee and sweet biscuits, that she would see the day's milky light. They clustered at tables by the windows, chatting or turning the pages of the free newspapers left on the table, asking questions of the teacher about the headlines.

Nadia enjoyed these classes, if not the pre-dawn timeslot. It felt as if she was becoming a more solid entity here as her language skills expanded. She had found she could make her classmates laugh with simple jokes or a well-timed remark. The teacher would look to her if no one volunteered to read aloud. Steadily she was coming to understand more of what was said on the streets and in people's homes, so that the isolation she had felt seemed to ebb from her, as if she had been deaf and now her hearing was being restored, word by word, phrase by phrase. Her growing competence in the language gave her a confidence that strengthened from week to week. She knew if she wasn't there her classmates would miss her and ask each other where she was and she could not think of another time and place that the world had felt quite like it did in this classroom.

Still, in company, she understood only small snatches here and there. She still feared embarrassing herself. She did not like for people to think her stupid, her words muddled or slow. But she greeted her clients in Dutch now. Most seemed to have forgotten that she once could not have done this, though several of them seemed to have warmed to her and they paid her with a smile and a few kind words. She did not know whether this was because she spoke some Dutch or just because some time had passed – they knew her a little and she had learned the eccentricities of each household.

When there was time, Nadia liked to linger after class with her classmates in the downstairs cafeteria with their cheese sandwiches and milk. They were students from the university, housewives, and trailing partners of expat executives who did not need to hurry over lunch. Each month it was a little easier to keep the conversation between them flowing, with their increasing reliance on Dutch, their one common language, softening the distances between them.

Heico stood by the window of his mother's apartment and looked out at the street below. He almost wished they still went to church at Christmas; it would give them something to do to fill in the day.

When he was a child, Heico had served on the altar at Christmas Mass. The church was almost always stifling, with girls flapping paper fans folded from the newsletter and latecomers standing up the back uncertain what to do when the others sat or kneeled. The usual smell of candle wax, flowers and fresh linen combined with pine needles and straw spread under the nativity scene. The surplices, the gilt-edged Lectionary, the thurible swung – carefully, choreographed – the smell of incense, the sound of its chains. Father bent low to whisper damply: solemn and slow, solemn and slow.

Heico could remember the feeling of his legs, in shorts, under his cassock and surplice. Clean and dry. The fabric brushing his skin. The smell of shoe polish. His mother in the second row, in an outfit that always creased before she got to where she was going; his father in shorts when the other men wore long pants.

After Mass, people chattered in the pews and gathered handbags and children's toys and missals. Heico's own swift steps across the sanctuary, the whisper of cloth, the weight of the candle snuffer, the smell of smouldering wick. It made him feel important to have these little, essential tasks that were his while Father shook hands with each parishioner at the back door.

'I'm proud of you,' said his father, when Heico's surplice hung in the cupboard in the sacristy again and he was back to being just Heico.

'Let's go,' said his mother glancing up at the sky as though it might, by some miracle,

suddenly begin to snow.

He poured himself another glass of red wine. In the kitchen he could hear Eliza explaining that no, her family didn't celebrate Christmas and no, she hadn't really missed it.

'Well,' he heard his mother say, 'it's nice you get to celebrate it here.' Eliza's reply was inaudible but no doubt non-committal. He should go in and rescue her, but the kitchen was too small for the three of them and he'd only be in their way.

His mother had bought a pre-packaged Christmas roast at *Albert Heijn*: turkey in a creamy pepper sauce and vegetables in a separate disposable tray. Come to think of it, he didn't know what it was Eliza and his mother were actually doing in the kitchen.

His mother had set up a small plastic Christmas tree in the front window with tinsel in red and silver. She would take it down tomorrow; it was only there for them. His mother had harboured an ambivalence about Christmas since they had returned to Holland after the divorce. Snow at Christmas had been rare, and their celebrations had had a generally sad air. The rest of the year the two of them felt like enough of a family, but at Christmas he missed Dad and he sensed Mum missed his father then too, if only for the extra noise and bustle, and for his talent for the unexpected. She would watch Heico unwrap the presents she had picked up for him from a department store in town, generic gifts frequently familiar from the catalogues that had arrived in the letterbox in the second week of December, and he would be careful to react with delight.

This year too, there were gifts under the tree. One for Eliza, one for him. They had brought a house plant for his mother, unsure what else she would want. The apartment was small and she had a knack for ingratitude for household items she hadn't chosen herself.

The plant was in the car still, waiting for the moment, when his mother would say: 'Shall we do the presents?' This would be followed by the exchange and then a sigh from his mother who would say: 'We should celebrate Sinterklaas.'

They had not celebrated St Nicolaas's feast day in Heico's childhood in Australia, and in his adolescence he had always felt that his mother and he were banding together to humour Opa and Oma: him playing the wide-eyed child he no longer was, his mother cheering his performance from the

side-lines and later eating his chocolate letter 'H' while he was at school.

'Sure,' they would say, but next year no one would make any move to make it happen.

In the car on the way home, Eliza was silent.

'About the church,' said Heico.

'The mosque?'

'No, you asked earlier why I didn't go to church.'

'You don't have to explain,' she said. She seemed tired, worn down.

'When I was a kid,' said Heico.

Eliza swallowed and looked at him. She turned the paperweight his mother had given her over in her hands. 'You know, we should visit your dad sometime,' she said.

'What?' said Heico

'You know, go to Australia, to see him.'

'Ah, no. I don't think …' The first time his mother had sent him home – on his own, on two planes – to see his father, his dad had met him at the airport and on seeing him had burst into tears. The episode had embarrassed both of them so much that Heico had not wanted to return the following year.

Now Heico had no friends to speak of in Perth. But he had a few cousins on his father's side whom he still spoke to, though infrequently. Each time the familiarity of a shared past was a shock – they had not been particularly close as boys but they had shared stories and memories from childhood. His grandparents – long dead now – and their backyard pool – an oasis at the centre of childhood summers. An inflatable orange dinosaur that lived in all of their memories for its aggressive seam that scratched the insides of their legs. Uncle Jeremy – still living at home when the boys were small – and his habit of holding the boys under the water a moment longer than strictly necessary, so their vision blurred and their lungs burned, and then assuring Nanna they were just 'horsing around' and, yes, he was taking care of them. Their parents, oblivious to Jeremy's bullying, pouring themselves another shandy on the veranda, the shrinking ice cubes clinking in their glasses always bobbing back

to the top.

They were men now – his cousins – with families and backyard pools of their own. But the distance that seemed inevitable, with all those years slipped by since then, somehow never got in the way and Heico was grateful that there existed in the world a few people who remembered pieces of his childhood just as he did.

Heico shook his head. The words seemed to be gone. His mouth was dry and his head was as empty as a tin can.

'It doesn't matter,' Eliza said. 'It's OK now.'

He was too tired now to persist. She was too tired to listen. 'OK,' he said. 'Another day.'

She nodded at the highway in front of them. She was still wrapped in the winter coat she'd put on as she left his mother's front door and he was glad to be headed home.

THREE

October 2005

<> Earthquake in Kashmir kills 87,000. <> A new edition of the ‘Green Booklet’ – the definitive guide to Dutch spelling – is launched. <> Seven terror suspects are arrested in Amsterdam, Almere, Leiden and The Hague. <> Eleven asylum seekers, detained at Schiphol airport ahead of deportation, die when fire breaks out in the complex. <>

There were days when the sky lay oppressively close to the ground and the wind pummelled the trees, throwing their branches in all directions, and Heico cycled against the wind, thinking of himself as a gull, tossed and battered, but determined. Sometimes it rained too, and then he would arrive at work dishevelled and wet, but feeling vaguely exhilarated by the small triumph of arrival despite the elements.

Today, he was in the office before half past eight. He had extricated himself from his rain gear and was making a hot chocolate in the kitchenette. Claartje had arrived at the office before him but her hair was still wild from traversing the car park. She nodded at his beverage. 'The body is a temple, huh?' She pulled a box of green tea, which bore her name in large black writing, from the cupboard overhead.

He smiled at her. 'Morning,' he said.

Imogen appeared in the tearoom doorway but, seeing Claartje waiting for the kettle to boil, grimaced at Heico and slipped away.

'Onno called,' said Claartje at length, making a show of dunking the tea bag up and down with an uncanny level of focus on the concoction in her tea glass. 'He's at that conference in Germany. He wants you to call him back.'

Heico knew the sort of meeting: scientists in suits, policy makers and funding bodies; a fancy hotel, late night cocktails at the bar; a chance to clip on a plastic badge and complain about all the paperwork involved in the new funding process.

'Thanks,' Heico said and headed straight for his office. He frowned at the pile of reports on

his desk and the puddle forming where he had hung his waterproof pants and rain jacket behind the door. He flopped into his chair and dialled his boss's mobile phone number. The sound of voices and coffee cups crowded Onno's voice on the line. He was in meetings, he said, he couldn't talk for long.

Onno had heard a murmur that their funding application for the new Hoopoe Migration Project was going to be denied. The EU had got word that migratory and coastal bird numbers were up and had concluded it wasn't a priority area right now. Did Heico perhaps know where their numbers had come from?

Heico's face was hot and at first his throat constricted so he could not answer his boss at all.

'Heico?'

'Yes.'

'Yes, you know where they got the numbers?'

'Ah, no.'

'No? Well it's just a rumour but I thought you might know. I have to go but–.' The phone line cut out and Heico put the receiver down. He stood up from his desk. A cold sweat had gathered on the back of his neck and shoulders and he felt a twitchy energy that he needed to expel from his body.

Had the EU got a hold of the images he had sent to Juliaan? The weekend newspaper reported that the city council had received letters of support from abroad: Switzerland, France. Heico, reading this, had wondered who these people were who took the time to write letters to support what was effectively just a delay of planning approval, and what exactly it was they thought they were applauding.

If the EU were basing their decision not to fund the new project on inadequately captioned GIS images that had come out of his office ... Was it possible? The Hoopoe Migration Project was a substantial part of Heico's plan for the team for the next three to five years. He had written the application himself. The funding, if they were successful, would mostly be controlled in this office: salary for new researchers, new tracking technologies, a reciprocal agreement with research institutes in the UK and South Africa. If the funding came through – and they had all assumed it probably would.

Heico stood up and looked at his watch. It was only nine o'clock. He rubbed his eyes and picked up his drink and took it back to the tearoom where he tipped the remaining contents down the drain and rinsed his cup in obedience to a note someone had taped above the draining board. No one at university had warned him about how long the office-bound days were, how tedious the tea-room politics, how endless the email threads, and just how much he would come to hate the smell of old coffee kept warm in the bottom of the office coffee maker.

'I'm going for a walk,' he said to nobody in particular and he grabbed his rain jacket – still wet – and headed out, head bent against the rain.

Youssef came in tired and worn low by the fast. He stood rummaging through the mail, unopened on the sideboard by the door. Nadia brought him a glass of water, which he took gratefully.

'I'm so sick of all the talk about the mosque,' he said in apparent response to one envelope. 'I don't see why we should be giving more money when they still don't know if they can use the land.'

Nadia shrugged. She was weary of the mosque-talk too but she was more sick still of the rolled-out carpets and the shared noticeboards, the smell of Friday's *Tafeltje Dek-Je* meals permeating their services – worse now that it was Ramadan so that her stomach groaned in protest.

'A decision has to be made soon or they will close the application without further review.'

Youssef raised his eyebrows. 'It's like a civics class in there. I thought you were supposed to be getting Dutch lessons.'

Actually, the imam had spoken about it at some length at Friday prayer. If the project wasn't approved by the end of the year it would have to be taken off the table for a minimum of seven years.

Nadia thought of the block of land that Youssef had pointed out to her once – taking a detour on the way to see his parents. She thought of the money they all had given. She thought of her teacher promising that if they learned to speak Dutch they would be listened to.

'I think it's all a lot of lies,' she said.

'What's a lot of lies?'

'All the concern about the trees that need to be chopped down and the insects and the birds.'

'Nature is very important here. At least symbolically,' Youssef said.

'But they are not really listening. We can see the birds and the trees but we have nothing we can show them. We have no symbols to match theirs. The mosque – if we could show it to them …'

'There's no symbol they would understand,' said Youssef.

They understood symbols. Why else were they concerned about headscarves in hospitals and schools?

'I feel like going to the snack bar,' Youssef said.

Nada had food ready for their *Iftar* meal in the kitchen but she nodded and stood to slip into the kitchen to turn off the oven.

The food at the snack bar – brightly coloured and lined up on plastic grass for selection, usually seemed unappetising to Nadia but tonight she felt hungry enough to eat almost anything.

'It reminds me of high school,' Youssef said. 'We'd stop on our way home for halal *mexicanos* and *patat*.'

She smiled at him. The selection of savoury treats made her feel a little unsteady on her feet.

'Try the *kipkorn*,' he said. 'Let me order for you.'

She nodded and watched him order from the pasty-faced man behind the counter. It was still strange to hear Youssef speaking Dutch. To watch him out in the world like this – the way he was both alone and at the same time so naturally part of this place in a way she could not imagine herself ever being.

After ordering he sat beside her on a high plastic stool. The lights here were forensically bright. He inclined his head to indicate the counter where he'd placed his order. 'He said: aren't you supposed to be fasting?'

'The sun's gone down.'

'He's just joking around.'

She looked across at the food their neighbours were pulling out of white paper bags at the next table. Chips with mayonnaise, a long stick of meat covered in a brown sauce, deep-fried snack foods in various colours and shapes.

'It's not good for you,' he said, 'but it tastes like some sort of freedom.'

She had noticed this in the films and on television as well – the way that people talked about

freedom, or love, or joy, as if it was something that might arrive on a plate or in a paper bag.

He took her hand in his and traced his fingers over her palm.

'Let's eat it at home,' said Nadia when the food was ready. She was hungry and she knew he was too, but the smells and sounds here were too much right now and she just wanted to be home.

November 2005

<> Train passengers call the police when two men in djellabas pay multiple visits to the bathroom. Police stop the train outside of Amsterdam and search it but nothing unusual is found. The men report they were completing a post-Ramadan ablutions ritual. <> Mass riots in France. Many of those involved are of foreign descent. <> Snowstorm causes eight hundred kilometres of traffic jams across the country. Thousands of train travellers spend the night in sports halls and hotels. <> One quarter of the value of Dutch-founded media company Endemol is listed on the Amsterdam stock market, seventy-five percent remains the property of Spanish Telefónica <>

In a Northern province, in the last dark days of autumn, a sparrow found herself trapped in a warehouse that was destined to be in the world's eye in just a few days. To the sparrow the warehouse seemed empty, though the floor space was covered with patterns the colours of flowers and there were a number of larger structures that peaked and dipped or spiralled like staircases, colourful and complex in the way of the playthings of humans.

She swooped low and landed inopportunely, upsetting a few hundred dominos painstakingly set by teenagers from a selection of European countries. The titles clattered softly, as they had been set to, in tidy rows, weaving artistically to reveal a mosaic of this or that European landmark. A couple of teenagers shrieked, several stood helpless, their hands clasped to their mouths and all around, attention turned to how, without further loss of domino-infrastructure, the bird could be removed.

The earth here was stable, not prone to tremors that could potentially derail the world record attempt due to be televised in a matter of days. Nevertheless, they had installed 'breaks' to save a small misstep in one corner of the room costing them many days of work.

The bird, frightened by the sounds she had triggered around her, had launched herself once again into the air. But it was only a matter of time before she might once again alight in some other part of the hall.

And so it was that a tall man in a dark suit, who had said very little since he arrived a few days ago in a very small car, took out a mobile telephone and called a pest control company to come without delay.

The pest controller arrived dressed in khakis, as if he were expected to rein in Big Game. He carried a net and pole and all manner of paraphernalia, but he was not able to catch the bird who flittered about the space creating further havoc in her panic.

The dark-clad man had a word to the supervisor, who was dressed like the coach of a sports team. The supervisor nodded. He surveyed the room and drew the teenagers to himself with a few words into his headset and a gesture of his hands.

'The producers want to buy us lunch,' he said to them. 'Does anyone like McDonalds?'

The volunteers filed into the car park. The pest controller, too, returned to his van. Some of the girls still clasped their hands to their chests, their chatter excited and horrified.

'Will the bird be OK?' asked a girl from Estonia.

Nobody bothered to answer.

A Swedish boy was weeping at the loss of three days work he had put in, flattened in a matter of seconds. 'And the cameras were not even here,' he said. A Ukrainian girl comforted him, stroking his arm and cooing an almost-lullaby with no words. The supervisor, headset still in place, waved them on to the bus and they were gone in a matter of moments.

Back inside the building, a shot sounded. The sparrow landed. Ripples of domino rivulets radiated out from her body. She seemed small when the animal controller came, stepping gingerly between rows, to collect her. He was reminded of the image of the Holy Spirit from his grandmother's home – rays of light shining out from the body of a bird. He gathered her in a cloth bag.

The young people would return in an hour. The supervisor should tell them what had happened, briefly, the producer said, and then they would return to their sectors.

For now the warehouse was quiet: the walls flexed in the cold but there were no voices. The animal controller returned to his van, the cloth bag still held lightly in his hands.

The news of the bird's death was not well received. People all over the country were outraged at the news of the death of the Domino-Sparrow. The animal controller began to get death threats. A radio DJ offered a cash reward to anyone who could topple the rest of the dominoes and people showed up

at the building with trained mice and leaf blowers. The television company fortified the building's security and went into damage control mode.

The sparrow had stumbled upon posthumous celebrity. Two songs were written in her honour and a condolence register was opened online. The Ministry of Agriculture wrote a letter to Animal Protection about the matter. And the Ministry of Justice gave the bird to the Natural History Museum in Rotterdam. She was handed over in a margarine container in which someone had kept her, in their freezer.

A year later, on the anniversary of her death, Heico was invited to the Natural History Museum's opening of *The Big House Sparrow Exhibition*. Four-hundred-and-fifty guests filled the cafeteria of the modern art gallery next door. A young musician had composed a new piece of music especially for the sparrow and he was in attendance to perform it. The gathered audience clapped appreciatively and looked around for drinks. A comedian in drag lamented that the government had allowed all this to happen at all; and an elderly scientist from England – vaguely recognised from a keynote speech at some long distant conference – recounted his long, sparrow-centric career. After a speech from the curator, the cafeteria staff served canapés and sparkling wine in plastic glasses and the bird stood in the museum across the way, on a plinth made of dominos in a tall glass display case all its own, its eyes bright and empty. The Domino Sparrow was the star of the show. It was a very strange sort of triumph.

Juliaan called. ‘They’ve scheduled a final planning meeting,’ he said. ‘We’ll run something on the mosque every week until then. I thought you’d want to know.’

‘Just write whatever you want,’ Heico said.

‘That’s not how it works,’ said Juliaan.

Heico sighed.

‘Should I ask you over the phone or …’

This afternoon he planned to go out to the bird sanctuary. A member of the public had reported that teenagers had been vandalising trees. Usually he would have just passed this information on to the rangers, but today he had decided to take a look for himself. ‘I could do next week?’

‘I’ve had a call from the States. They’ve invited me to cover “Mormons Gone Wild”,’ Juliaan said.

Heico raised his eyebrows but said nothing.

‘They’re filming in Spain. They put you up in a villa and all you have to do is step onto the balcony occasionally to see if the kids will or will not jump in the pool with each other, with or without their sacred underwear.’

‘Like how the Amish let their teenagers leave home and go crazy in the city for a while?’

‘Raumspringa. Actually, yes, that’s the pitch. “Raumspringa for Moroni’s chosen.”’ He paused. ‘I guess that’s not how they worded the audition call in the *Salt Lake Tribune*.’

Heico grimaced in sympathy. ‘It’s a wonder *Endemol* didn’t think of it first. You’re going to

do it?'

'It's an opportunity. They hope the story will get picked up all over Europe. It's good exposure.'

'Mormon kids doing shots of grape juice and embarrassing their families.'

'The media team just report this stuff; I'm not funding the first season.'

'Of course you are!'

There was a silence on the line.

'Next Friday, then? The usual place?'

When Heico arrived at the reserve it was quiet: the place had an out-of-time feeling, when no one was around, that he usually liked.

He thought of how scientists were reporting that many of the redwoods in Southern California had already died. When he had first read about this, he had not believed it. Not because he mistrusted the source, but because it was impossible to imagine those sky-touching trees – still verdant, the pale sunlight filtering between them – as dead already. No way to save them, already gone.

Just past the bridge a small herd of deer had congregated. There were far too many deer in the reserve. The kids would be hard pressed to be doing more damage than the deer that ate the low branches and bark from many of the trees, and demolished smaller shrubs altogether. Several experts had proposed a cull but Amsterdam voters would not tolerate it, and the deer were not strong enough to survive transportation elsewhere. Meanwhile local residents complained of deer on the roads or in their backyards: eating the foliage and making a nuisance of themselves. The rangers shrugged: their hands were tied by local politics. 'The furry shall inherit the earth,' Onno had said when Heico mentioned the problem. Onno had a pragmatist's talent for not allowing that which he could not change to cost him any sleep.

A few meters away from where Heico stood, a pheasant – magnificent in copper breast feathers, with a bright red wattle around his eyes – regarded him steadily. The pheasants here were descendants of the ones the hunters once released for sport. It squawked – and turned from him but

did not hurry away.

Soon Eliza would be headed home to Boston. She had not tried to convince Heico to come along. She had simply booked a ticket and emailed him her itinerary. He had stared at the email for a long time, and then he had filed it so it wasn't sitting in his inbox reminding him of the empty days ahead.

A shrike, perched at the top of a tree, watched him pass. A masked bandit. The German flashed into Heico's mind: *Neuntöter* – nine-killer – for the way it impaled its prey on thorns – trophies lined up in a gruesome row. He felt a flash of fellow feeling for the bird today.

The rangers had recently stripped the dunes of grasses here to let the sands move again. They hoped this would encourage more species back into the area – beetles and lizards. But the grasses would grow back, fixing the dunes in place again. People wanted you to think that change was normal, but out here stasis had taken hold. Sand dunes were supposed to shift and move but instead the restless, timeless sands had been anchored by the grasses. It seemed strange that it was even possible. And though the seasons rolled by, underneath all the superficial changes, the land remained unchanged.

On the ride home Heico's future flashed before him: all the most tedious hours ahead.

A thousand meetings;

afternoon visits to ailing parents, in-laws; later friends.

Days spent bed-ridden with the flu;

traffic lights;

supermarkets;

staring at the ceiling trying to sleep.

Several long conversations with Eliza;

days worth of time spent flossing;

transatlantic movie marathons in economy airline seats.

Train stations;

waiting rooms;

an infinity of commercial breaks;

waiting for kettles to boil, coffee to percolate, rain to clear, web pages to load. All so endless and unavoidable.

When he got off his bike he felt weak and disoriented as if waking from a nightmare, which he spent the rest of the evening pushing out of his thoughts.

Nadia visited one of the art galleries in the city. She would meet Youssef later to attend a dinner with his colleagues and he had suggested she take the opportunity to visit one of the galleries on *Museumplein*.

The collection wasn't what she'd expected. She stood for a long time in front of a painting of the workshop in which one horizontal slice of the Statue of Liberty was being created. The left arm of the colossus was visible – the tablet already in her hand – and people stood in small groups around her torso in old-fashioned dress consulting plans and each other. The honesty of the image surprised her: the rubble of timber and debris in the foreground, the structure of the building obscuring the subject and pushing it to the background. She stood in front of the work, taking it in, until her eyes ached.

On every floor, the paintings were layers of human endeavour: love and jealousy; civics and travel; medicine, law and architecture all piled into one building for anyone to wander in and encounter. She remembered playing a computer game at a school friend's home as a child – the idea had been to move a character around the screen to collect pellets of 'food.' The computer made a joyful little ping and the character's 'health' score increased with each successful consumption. Being in this gallery felt a bit like that: each image seemed to fill her up, making her stronger.

The Islamic wing held her longer than the others. The familiar colour combinations buoyed her so she felt she could almost float on their repeating blues and greens and whites, the repetitions and tessellations. The intricacies beyond anything he had seen at home. Miniatures and mosaics. Calligraphy and latticework; ceramics and metal work. Textiles so beautiful she longed to reach out and stroke them.

She lingered in the gallery until closing time, her eyes watery, until voices from above

announced in three languages: *We will soon be closing, please make your way to the exit*. And when she stepped out into the street she felt lightheaded – the colours of the square in front of her swirled strangely and she realised she hadn't eaten for hours.

'What did you think?' Youssef asked her later.

The magic of the works still had a hold of her. 'Everything was so incredible, I wanted to eat them.' She shook her head slightly to acknowledge the inaccuracy of the way she had expressed the thought.

Youssef raised his eyebrows and smiled. 'Sounds like I've been away too long.'

Heico drove Eliza to the airport on a colourless day in mid-November.

'You'll miss *vijf december*,' he said though they wouldn't have celebrated it, even if she were home. The sky hung low over the fields and it felt as if the sun was already gone for the day, though it was still early afternoon. 'I don't think I'll get a Christmas tree without you,' he said. 'It seems stupid, just for me.'

'Do what you want,' she said. 'Get a tree.'

Heico shook his head. 'Is Ruthie going to be at home?'

Everyone was coming home to see her. Her youngest sister was making the most fuss about how much trouble it was: a four-hour train ride. Ruthie planned to stay at least a week, so the two of them would have time to wear out the politeness and would begin to fight like sisters again.

'Sounds like fun,' Heico said. She never saw it coming, the inevitable creep of family irritation.

'I can't wait,' Eliza said glancing at her reflection in the mirror - her face alight with joyful anticipation. 'It'll be so good to see them all.'

Eliza called him when she arrived at her parents' house. 'Dad thought you might be worried,' she said. She sounded far away.

Without her, their house felt temporary. No doubt she would complain, when she returned, that he had let everything go while she was away, but that wasn't really true. It was just that the cumulative effect of living without her constant corrective presence would mean that dust might settle

unnoticed, a house plant might begin to wilt. Eliza held things together; she kept things alive.

She yawned, or pretended to. 'It's late here,' she said.

He felt sleepy too. Her voice had lulled him into a sympathetic doze though the day was beginning to lighten outside. 'Of course.' She was so far away it was like he was talking to himself. '*Slaap lekker*.'

She hung up and he felt the thick silence of their house against the activity of the neighbours' morning routine, audible through the shared wall.

Later, in the office, red-flagged emails spilled in a column down the right-hand side of his computer screen, all the subject lines meaningless or identical, interspersed with increasingly insistent emails from Onno asking him to clarify what he and the Minister had been hearing about data Heico's office had released to the media being questioned by academics at Stanford and Wageningen.

In the beginning he had tried to reply, but later there was nothing more to say. He had not released any more information; the same material had been recycled and republished, hashed out, interpreted by journalists, religious commentators, soil scientists and anyone the media had found who would comment.

More articles had come in attached to emails from colleagues and his automated search had turned up documents in English, French, Danish, German ... he was fairly certain there was at least one in Arabic.

He felt ill. It was lucky that Onno was busy. If he had had time to press him, Heico would have had to come up with something other than simple ignorance. His throat felt as if it had swollen up so that he could not swallow. He lowered himself into his desk chair, tipped his head back and closed his eyes.

'Heico?'

He sat up and opened his eyes. It was Claartje in his doorway. 'Yes.'

'Everything OK?' she asked. Her concern stretched her face into an unnatural configuration.

'Just too much coffee I think.'

She smiled a watery smile and tapped her nails on the files she was carrying. ‘Right,’ she said and nodded towards her office and then paused one awkward moment too long before she followed her indicated path and left.

‘Right,’ echoed Heico to the empty doorway and he began deleting the emails one by one.

‘I did some research,’ said Juliaan moving his beer out of the way to flip through his notes. ‘It looks like most birds prefer to fly long stretches over land, not water.’

Heico pressed his lips together and nodded. ‘That’s right.’

‘Your migratory birds aren’t coming into the sanctuary in the dunes after days out over the sea ...’

‘It’s not like we hold intake interviews or ask for a written application. I don’t control which birds use the reserve or where they’ve come from. If we have migratory birds there, then that’s where they are.’

‘OK, but this development doesn’t pose a threat to the reserved space itself.’

Heico sighed. ‘Well the development is not in the reserve, but the block borders it directly so it can affect its integrity in terms of air quality, sound levels, waste issues, increasing human traffic, weeds, disease.’

Juliaan scribbled a few notes in his notebook and then looked at him in silence.

Heico took a deep breath. ‘I don’t think that anything that you or I say is going to make much difference. No one really cares about the birds, but they do still care about the assassination of Theo van Gogh and the council is not going to approve these plans. Not now.’

‘Can I quote you on that?’

‘Why would you?’ said Heico.

Juliaan sighed and dried up a patch of condensation on the table with a cardboard coaster. ‘That first summer, when I called you,’ he glanced up to check that Heico was listening, ‘I’m embarrassed to tell you this: I knew it was a mosque.’

Heico looked at him blankly.

'I asked you what you thought of the planned "development" hoping you would think of some mega retail warehouse or units for wealthy retirees and deliver me some controversy to write about. My editor kept giving me assignments where there was no real story and I was sick of it.' Juliaan held his glass to his forehead as if he suspected he might have a fever. 'You didn't ask what the development was so I didn't tell you. I had no idea this would still be going on. I'm sorry.'

Heico gave a half shrug. 'You were just doing your job. I was just doing mine.'

'You wouldn't have sent me that same bird migration map if you'd known it was a mosque.' Juliaan looked like he desperately wanted to believe this.

'Sure I would have.'

'It was misleading and inaccurate.'

'Only if you assumed it was a migration pattern of a single year.'

'You didn't send a caption.'

'You didn't ask for a caption. You asked for data.' Heico lifted his empty beer glass off the tabletop and gestured to the waiter for two more. 'What's done is done. It wouldn't have changed anything – the birds fly over, don't they?'

'Do they?'

Heico shrugged. 'Not every bird, every year, perhaps. But things change. A building goes up in another part of town and it nudges the birds towards the migration corridor a bit earlier, or later, in their flight trajectory. Or the weather patterns change and we see them three weeks earlier and their path has shifted.'

Juliaan stood up abruptly.

Heico looked up, his forehead creased. 'You're going?'

'I should have been a sports journalist.'

Heico clanged his beer onto the table making the liquid slosh around in the glass. 'I don't care that you withheld the information about what sort of development it was, because it's irrelevant. It's a human development and, in my professional opinion, it's not appropriate in the proposed location. That's all there is to it, but if you don't want to hear it, then I wish you'd stopped calling me for my

opinion a long time ago.'

Juliaan shook his head and gathered his notes and keys.

Heico remained at the table and drank one of the two beers and then, not having any particular plans for the afternoon, he drank half of the other one too. Eliza was away and his work situation felt precarious. And there was something else, a resistance to the way Juliaan looked at him. He didn't know why he cared, but he felt – though he couldn't have said why – that he needed Juliaan to understand why he couldn't just nod along with all the rest of them, why he had to prioritise the birds. But he felt his opportunity to explain it to him was slipping away.

When he got home that evening the house was empty and dark. He liked arriving home when Eliza was already there: the house warm and emanating soft light. He hated that it was winter when she wanted to go home. On his own, he felt ridiculous lighting table lamps and sitting in their glow. When Eliza was away he usually just switched on the overhead light and sat in its glare to do a little work on his laptop at the dining table or he watched too much TV with the dog – patient and bored – beside him on the couch. It was nights like this one that he felt his exposure to passers-by most acutely. He wondered what they thought of him, sitting alone there, whether they pitied him and felt superior, hurrying home to their own particular domestic bliss.

In the entrance there was a package for him addressed in Eliza's looping, generous script. She had packaged it to fit flat through the mail slot, to save him a trip to the post office to pick it up. He opened it before removing his coat.

The package contained a cream-coloured card and a row of Almond Joy bars – his favourite treat from the raft of foolish candy bars she had introduced him to the first Christmas they spent together – and a small wrapped gift for his mother. He resisted the temptation to open it to see what was inside. *A Christmas gift*, the card read, *I think I will miss celebrating Christmas this year. Just a little*.

(*There's no need to gloat)*, she had added on the reverse side. He stilled the small fist of pride beginning in his abdomen and smiled wryly at how well she knew him. He flicked open his laptop but

everything made him feel fragmented and alone. He reached for the remote control and then restrained himself from turning on the television, knowing his own ability to dissolve hours this way: flicking channels, numb and unable to get up and walk away. It was like chewing a couch cushion.

The truth, he thought, was that he and Eliza had injured each other not with words or deeds but with inattention. He thought of Eliza's shrinking energies, his own periodic night terrors, the way the dog seemed confused sometimes about which of them he should try to please, as if he sensed some competition between them for his affections but was refusing to take sides.

Heico pulled out his phone and scanned down his contact list for friends he could disturb on a Tuesday night to go to the pub or shoot some pool or do whatever it was they used to do. But now everyone had children to feed and bathe and a weeknight television regime that was rarely disturbed.

The only person he could think of who wouldn't be put out by a last minute invitation was Juliaan van der Linden himself. Not a friend, strictly, but Heico felt he needed to set the record straight on some not strictly journalistic front. And with these things the sooner you acted the better. It wasn't the facts he wanted to clarify – it was his own motivation. He needed to explain himself to Juliaan. He wanted a chance to respond to the accusation on Juliaan's face when he left this afternoon and besides, he needed to not be alone in the house tonight.

A peregrine falcon, if left untended, would return to being a wild creature in a matter of days. The key was not to allow himself to be alone.

Heico had just arrived when Juliaan pulled into the car park of the same bar they had met at during the day. Juliaan stepped out of his car, flicked his key ring to lock the door and walked over and stood watching Heico lock his bike to the metal rack.

'I looked up the birds that orient themselves using echoes that you mentioned.'

Heico nodded. He hadn't come to talk about the birds.

'The birds that use echolocation are mostly cave dwellers in the Americas and Asia.'

Heico straightened and shrugged. 'I didn't say birds here used it.'

'I think the implication ...'

'Have a drink with me,' Heico said and the two men went into the bar.

It was different this time. Not a work obligation and once they were seated there was a silence, as if they were both wondering what it was they were supposed to say. In the corner a Christmas tree blinked its gaudy lights at them. He hadn't noticed it there earlier. Wasn't it too early for Christmas trees?

'Deep inside the forest, the bird populations drop. They all want to be on the edge of things.'

Juliaan's face lit up as the implications of this occurred to him. 'The birds don't even want to be undisturbed?'

'They like domestic food sources and the exotic trees people plant in their backyards.'

Juliaan's face was almost shining. 'The birds *like* the interface with human living space? So they'll have no issue with the mosque?'

'You know what – maybe they won't. Maybe they'll roost in the trees and forage for scraps from the *Iftar* and the starlings will imitate the call to prayer.'

Juliaan look at him impressed. 'This is on the record?'

'Everything's on the record. Birds are adaptable – who knows what they'll do: urban woodpeckers sound out their territories using street lamp casings, blackbirds hunt worms by the light of street lights and herons fish by the red lights on the bridges. House sparrows love cities but their numbers are declining anyway and no one knows why.' He felt deeply sad about it all. 'So who really knows what will happen if the mosque goes ahead? Not me.'

The men lapsed into silence again.

'I'm sorry about this afternoon,' Heico said after a while.

'Let's just –, let me get us another round.'

Neither of them had finished their first, but Juliaan got up from the table to order more drinks.

In the bathroom, the graffiti on the wall read: 'god is lonely.' Heico let the message rattle in his mind for a while, wondering about that lower case god. He washed his hands and read it again. It was nothing. Empty words. He let the warm water continue to run; he squirted more liquid soap into his

hands and began to rub them over each other again.

He was reluctant to return to Juliaan at the bar. The energy between them had changed. The fact that Heico had called him after hours was different and new and it was not about birds or mosques or planning permits; he didn't quite know what it was about, only he did know that if he returned to him now things would have shifted again.

What would Eliza be doing? He thought of her hosting a dinner party for old friends in her mother's dining room. The meal interrupted by the cries of small children from an adjacent room. But no, with the time difference, it would only be afternoon there now. He turned the cold tap off and let the hot water redden his hands.

He should go home, he thought. If he left now, things could stay the same. Juliaan had his story. He had all the information that Heico could give him. Heico hadn't called him out tonight to give him one last exclusive piece of information; he had called him because he was lonely and he didn't know who else to call. And perhaps because he regretted some of the information he had given him, and he wanted to turn things back or forward – he didn't know which.

Heico looked in the mirror. If he didn't come out of the bathroom now, Juliaan might come looking for him, concerned that he had been gone so long. If he could leave without Juliaan noticing, that is what he would do. It had started to rain outside, but it wasn't far. He would send an apologetic text message when he got home, saying he'd been feeling ill and he was sorry, and that he owed him a beer. But if Juliaan looked up and saw him, Heico would have to re-join him. He would have to say something and the question-loaded moment would open up between them. There would be no avoiding it anymore. He willed Juliaan to be distracted by the bar staff or the drinks menu or his phone. He turned off the tap, dried his hands and opened the bathroom door.

It seemed to Heico that the word 'furtive' contained in it the ultimate insult. It reminded him of the bible passage about 'deeds done in the darkness.' He remembered listening to Mrs Crowley reading those words at the lectern and watching Father Sherwin's placid face from the other side of the sanctuary wondering what he was thinking. 'Furtive' encompassed sin, shame, guilt and an

implication of repulsion all in its tightly held meaning, and it was this word that popped into his head when he found himself in Juliaan's car, looking out at the rain.

'Let me drop you home,' said Juliaan.

Hecio reached his hand out towards Juliaan but, faltering, ended up holding the gear stick. Juliaan put his own hand on top of Heico's for a moment. They sat like that, both watching through the windscreen as the rain intensified.

'My bike,' Heico said. 'I should be …'

Juliaan reached across and brushed his fingers along Heico's jawline. Heico glanced at Juliaan in the rearview mirror and then turned towards him, reaching out to touch his face. Heico felt something unlocking, something in him responding to Juliaan in a way he had not experienced before so when Juliaan moved his body toward him, the resistance he would have imagined from himself was not there and – in its place – were the words 'it is happening.' Perhaps, in some way, he had wanted this and never knew.

At the back of his mind he sensed a part of him that was sober, a part of him that knew exactly what he was doing, that same part that he would have expected to be yelling in his ear 'No, no, no, no, no!' instead stood calmly by. It frightened him and somehow reassured him at the same time. He closed his eyes for a moment and breathed in.

'Are you OK?' said Juliaan.

Heico opened his eyes, leaned across the small space between them now and kissed him. Juliaan's face was rough, his body firm, solid under his hands.

Later, thinking back to the drive through the rain, Heico remembered his body softly buzzing but no words. Had they spoken? He did not remember.

Juliaan's street was full of cars; the only available parking space was two blocks away. Juliaan gestured in the direction of his house before leading the way, running, through the pouring rain. Fumbling with the key in the front door he laughed – perhaps at his clumsiness, perhaps at the sight of the drenched Heico. Inside they looked at one another for a moment. The rain had slicked

their hair to their faces. They wiped the water from their faces with their hands. The sounds of belt buckles and plastic buttons clicked on to the polished boards and there was the soft fall of winter layers divested, quickly, in the light of a bank lamp on the hall table. Juliaan's body was lithe and strong. And inside Heico a body-memory stirred and began to unfold. Coloured light and the smell of stone. He could taste an old, rusty guilt – sour and metallic. An ache that had become a part of him, seemed to dislodge like a pebble. He was still here and he was all right. He had been so young. So, so young. And the guilt had never been his to begin with.

When Heico got home (in a taxi through the row-house streets in the pre-dawn glow) he went to bed, and Woolf left his basket in the lounge room to sleep on the floor beside his bed.

Heico slept as if sleeping could erase something. When he woke, disoriented and strangely jet-lagged but mercifully in his own bed, he was not sure if he had dreamed the events of the night before: it seemed so unreal, a figment of his apparently needy, reaching subconscious. He had done things his high school classmates had jeered about. He searched for the words but the ones that presented themselves seemed like accusations. The reality had been clarity, physicality and light and yet the act itself was already indistinct in his memory.

He wanted to sleep again. He picked up his mobile from beside his bed and called the office. He left a message and then he rolled himself tightly into the blankets and went back to sleep.

Later, when he woke again, he selected a novel from the pile on Eliza's nightstand and allowed the language to inhabit him, not even trying to understand, allowing his clothes to sour, unchanged. Eliza was far away and he felt like a former, less solid version of himself.

When he woke the third time he could hear birds, though the sky was murky outside the window. He stretched his legs and then arms without pushing outside the warmth of the blankets.

He missed Eliza but she had a way of reading him that sometimes alarmed him. In recent months, she had seemed to turn her attention away from him, leaving him freer and more alone. He thought that probably these days she saved her people-reading energy for her boss who had an unpredictable streak that could exhaust her by Tuesday.

She was still a teenager, he sometimes thought, the way she clung to people. Her friends from high school were a transatlantic lifeline that if neglected could leave her wilted and unlike herself; her sisters and mother were apparently essential to her day-to-day survival. He did not know anyone else whose life was held up by so many poles and guy ropes to people from their past.

He stood under the shower for much too long, letting the warm water comfort him from something he couldn't put his finger on: a sort of injury he sensed in himself. He turned the hot tap up and let the heat scald his skin – punishment? No. Something purer and cleaner than that: cauterisation, perhaps.

The teacher read to them from the work of a poet – long dead – and Nadia stared at the photocopied page in front of her as words fell like dead leaves past her mind. *Eeuwigheid. Eindeloos, Onbewust.* The sounds were shards of something: a summer day on a canal, on the way to some other place. She propped her elbows on the table either side of the page and rested her chin in her hands.

Around her, her classmates and teacher were speaking a language that she still did not fully understand and the world outside felt far away. Perhaps the teacher saw something in Nadia's face today because she did not call on her.

There were exams on the horizon for them now: listening, speaking, writing, reading, and the promise of these had sucked the enjoyment out of the classes for her. Every exercise foreshadowed some element of the exams. Even the ordeal of getting herself to the location – in the centre of Amsterdam – made her nervous. An unknown building, rows of desks, barked orders and finally the fear that – though her teacher assured them otherwise – these exams would reveal her weakness in each of these four areas in turn and she would fail them all.

She even feared her own anxiety – the way nothing made sense when she was nervous. The oral exam was the most frightening of all. She knew her tendency to default to silence when unsure. The speaking exam would be held in a language laboratory full of people stammering into their headsets all around her and she pictured the examiners – later – in a very bright white room – frowning as they listen to her responses.

'Just speak clearly into the microphone,' her teacher advised. 'Make sure your prepared speech runs for at least five minutes. There's time to prepare a few notes. Take a pen. Wear a watch.

Once you have spoken for the minimum time you may stop – don't feel you have to fill the silence. Read the instructions carefully. And don't worry: you are ready.'

But Nadia didn't feel ready.

Today, her mind was a museum of objects and she walked its long corridors stopping to inspect half-remembered things. Meanwhile her father's voice announced over and over: *We will soon be closing, make your way to the exits please*, hurrying her back towards the real world. But she stalled her natural impulse to obey, stopping in front of a jar of shells from a seaside holiday, her wedding outfit, a pair of shoes she had worn as a child, a coat that smelled of her father, a porcelain statue of an English milkmaid her mother kept on a side table, unexplained.

She was just homesick Youssef said. But this didn't seem right. She did not want to return home, she simply wanted her life to fit together in a way it never would again now that she lived so far from so many of the people she knew and loved. And even so, she knew that this place, this life, was her real home now.

Her family could visit her – one day soon perhaps they would – but she was not the same person who had left the village and they would sense it the moment they saw her. And even though the people here saw her as a foreigner, now she would seem changed to her family and friends. If she returned home, she would be a foreigner in the very place she had always called home.

Heico spoke to Eliza on the phone:

'Some days I think I'm losing my mind,' he said.

'Because of work?'

'Because of everything.' He didn't want her to know what had happened with Juliaan and at the same time he wanted so badly for Eliza to really understand him.

He'd always thought infidelity, looked back on, would appear in guilt-vibrant colours. But the memory of the encounter with Juliaan was abstract: water colours left to fade – unclear and impossible to focus on. Small pieces remained: the clean lines of Juliaan's ground floor apartment. A wooden chair that stood by the door. Birch wood. Pale. A dark branch that scratched at the window in as the rain poured down.

He sat back, closed his eyes and willed Eliza to somehow, magically, intuit the right thing to say, even though he himself did not know what that would be.

Eliza exhaled. 'I'm not the same person without you. I turn into some former self and it's not pretty – ask Ruthie, ask Mom.'

'You're being too hard on yourself. You're just comfortable, you've let your guard down. You should do that here.'

'Believe me, you wouldn't want that. This morning I actually pulled Ruth's hair because she took the last of the muesli.'

Heico smiled, picturing it. 'I think I love you a little bit more now you've told me that.'

'Oh yeah? Then you'll love what happened on Tuesday –.'

‘Let’s leave a little mystery.’ He wished she was here, that things were simple between them, that she’d wanted to be here with him for Christmas. ‘Lizzy?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Not everything that happens means something.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘Just … don’t be too hard on yourself.’

‘Well ... thanks, I guess.’

They were silent for moment.

‘Tell me something I don’t know,’ Eliza said, an old game they had once played on long road trips across America, telling each other secrets they’d never told anyone else.

Heico’s mind raced. What could he tell her – about himself – that was true, that she didn’t already know, but that they could cope with over this distance?

He felt the swirling guilt gathering in his abdomen. He felt nauseous and light-headed. ‘I don’t really feel up for this game right now.’

‘What? Why not? Just tell me something you’ve been doing or thinking about while I’m not there. I’ve got no idea –’

‘I think Imogen fancies me.’

‘Imogen? From work? Really?’

He felt oddly affronted by her scepticism. ‘Yes, really.’

‘Well be careful, then. She seems the sort who gets what she wants, one way or another.’

Surely Eliza had met Imogen no more than once. How did women do this: form such clear opinions about other women so swiftly? His mother was the same, with her comments about shop girls, his teachers and now neighbours with whom she had the thinnest acquaintance.

‘You think?’

‘Yes,’ said Eliza. ‘You’ll have to watch yourself with her.’

A profound sadness gripped him. For a moment he couldn’t breath.

‘Heico?’

He swallowed. ‘Tell me something I don’t know.’ The echoed invocation was part of the game, the reciprocity implicitly already agreed to when she initiated the game, so he was surprised when she hesitated.

She was silent for so long that he wondered if she was still there, until he heard her take a deep breath. ‘I think some tiny part of me was glad when they told me I couldn’t have children.’

The pain of this struck Heico in the gut. It felt like it was choking him and he didn’t entirely understand why. Perhaps it was the echoes of those endless days. The countless tests, the nights he’d lain beside her, as tears streamed down her face, not knowing any more words to say; completely powerless to fix things, for her, for both of them.

‘I remember a voice in my head saying, “Maybe now I can be free.” I have no idea where that came from but –’ He could hear her sobbing. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

What she had thought in that moment: it had changed nothing, and yet years later, at a conference in Japan, he experienced a minor earthquake – barely noted by his hosts – and he thought back to this moment, with the ground dropping away beneath his feet.

‘It’s OK,’ he managed to say, now, his voice strangled and strange in his ears. He wanted to comfort her but he couldn’t think of anything else to say, nothing that wouldn’t make things worse. Heico pressed the phone so hard to his ear that it hurt and for a long time neither of them said anything.

‘Heico?’

He swallowed, his throat still constricted. He looked around at the empty house. ‘I really miss you, you know.’

‘I know,’ said Eliza. ‘I miss you too.’

When he hung up he felt awake: his body buzzing, the atmosphere close to his skin. His face felt tight and cold and he did not know what to do with the energy in his limbs. Eliza, at least, was surrounded by sisters and girlfriends and a kind of hologram of the life she’d left behind. Heico looked around to try to find something he could do now that might make her happy, the way that she used to be happy.

He began throwing open the blinds and windows. The cold air streamed through the house. He found cloths and buckets and cleaning products in more varieties than he had known they owned and he threw half a bottle of the most familiar looking product into a bucket of warm water and began to clean.

He cleaned in silence until he noticed it and then he returned to the living room to dig out some old CDs. He wanted to hear something that spoke to who he was, but all of his music seemed tired and overplayed, museum pieces from another life. He ran his finger along Eliza's CD collection, brought over in batches each time she returned home. He selected something from her most recent visit and later was surprised that he recognised a few tracks and found himself singing along: *You're driving me crazy – when are you coming home?* Thinking of Eliza, thinking of himself, thinking of Juliaan. The way his hair was just a little too long at the nape, and curled like a child's – fine and blonde.

Heico scrubbed and cleaned until his hands were barely his own. He lost track of how many times he changed CDs, allowing the gritty sentimentality of Eliza's music to fill him with easy, borrowed emotion.

When he had run out of things to clean he stood in the living room, hands on his hips. The furniture is wrong, he thought. He began pushing each piece back against the wall so that the room acquired a large, empty centre. Space, he thought, we need more space.

He walked the rest of the house stashing items out of sight in wardrobes, scooping decorative items into drawers, finding hidden dust clusters and banishing them with his cloth. When he reached the back door he flung it open and stood in the cold inspecting their measly backyard. It angered him: this small life they had bought for themselves.

Sometimes, when he encountered Eliza at the breakfast table, she was a stranger whose thoughts were opaque to him. If her dreams had changed in the last few years, he did not know what the new ones were, other than that he assumed they played out in America: that land of dreams and crushingly false nostalgia that he could not yet give in to.

When geese migrate the males take the lead, with ducks it's the females.

He sighed and returned to the stillness of the living room. Cleaning had left his skin powdery dry and his nose stung with chemicals. He lay down on the couch.

He woke with a bad taste in his mouth and the sense of having missed something. Ten o'clock. He got up and turned all the lights off and returned to the couch hoping he could sleep until morning, since there was nothing, really, left to do.

It was his telephone that woke him. Eliza.

'I'm thinking of staying a bit longer.' The phone line crackled after her words.

'What about work?' Heico said.

'I'll figure it out.'

He wished he had the same confidence. 'Umm.'

'It's just a thought.'

'OK,' said Heico. 'We'll talk later, I guess.' He did not hang up and nor did she.

'Let me tell you something you don't know …'

The room was bright around him and he had the impulse to derail this intimacy. This form of the game was unprecedented. Did it carry with it the same forced reciprocity? He could not risk that today. He couldn't afford to tell Eliza any more secrets – not while she was so far away. An image of himself seated untidily in the middle of Imogen's cardinal-red couch rose, unwelcome, before his mind's eye. In it the couch is huge and he too is out-sized, a Lincoln-memorial-type figure with his missing coat slung over the back visible behind him. And that's only the beginning. And still no words to stop her come to mind.

She drew a breath as if she, too, was reluctant to plunge in.

His mouth was dry and useless and he was more afraid of her next words than he had ever been of any unspoken words.

'I am no bird,' Eliza said after a long pause.

This was not what Heico had been expecting. 'What? Of course not!' The abstract obviousness of the statement was irritating to Heico and the sudden invocation the birds too, after

months of wanting to talk to her about the birds and the mosque and the short-sightedness of the city councillors.

He heard her sigh on the other end of the line. 'Just –.'

He was too tired for this conversation right now. 'Let's talk about it tomorrow,' he said, though their tomorrows were different days now.

'Alright, tomorrow,' she said. 'But you should read *Jane Eyre*.'

He supressed a sigh of his own: he was only just awake, she was thinking of staying home longer and now she was recommending classic novels to him? 'Sure,' he said. '*Jane Eyre*.'

When she had hung up the phone, he flopped back on the couch and closed his eyes.

Nadia collected herself slowly, the morning prayer was behind her and light – waxy with the lateness of the year – now filled the room. Below, the birds congregated waiting for seed and above the city an aeroplane pressed heavily southward. But she would not think of home. This was now her home.

She gathered a few items into her bag. There was work to do. The sky outside was thick and unpromising. Perhaps, one day soon, there would be snow.

Classes were over for the year, the exams completed though her results were still not in. The dark days ahead would compress the prayer times until they stacked on top of each other with barely any time in between. But she was grateful, still, for their marking out the sun's meagre appearance and short progress, low across the sky. *Fajr, Dhuhr, Asr, Maghrib*. If she left now she could be home in time for the midday prayer. She slung her bag over her shoulder and left.

She could smell the cleaning products as soon as she unlocked the door. The house was already clean and things felt emptier here somehow. Were they moving? The dog clicked across the polished boards to greet her, and she crouched to stroke him.

There was someone in the living room. Mr Brandsma was sitting on the couch, legs wide, a throw rug beside him, his eyes wide and confused.

'*Ik ben Nadia*,' she said, standing up. '*Ben jij ziek*?'

'No,' he scrambled to his feet. 'No, I'm not sick.' He was dressed in faded jeans and a dark t-shirt. He seemed crumpled and shrunken. 'Eliza's away and ...' He was looking around himself as if he were expecting other people to begin to arrive.

It was draughty. The cold outside air blew in through an open window behind her and she

walked over to close it.

'I'm fine, I'm fine. I'm sorry,' Heico said. Did Eliza speak English with her or Dutch? He hadn't though she spoke much Dutch. He ran his fingers through his hair. 'I'm sorry,' he said again, this time he spoke Dutch to her. 'Would you like tea?'

He indicated that she should sit on the couch. She sat forward clutching her bag on her lap. He made them both tea, glad to have thought of something to do. She had indicated that she would leave but he was curious about her and he was awake now anyway.

'You've heard about the mosque plans?' he asked. He didn't know what else to talk about.

'Yes,' she said. She nodded and smiled weakly.

Nadia wanted to tell him what it meant, the mosque that he could allow to be if he only stopped talking to the city council about birds. 'Like at home,' she said.

Heico stopped what he was doing and looked at her. 'At home?'

'A mosque – is like a home, here – when you're far from the home you grew up in and your family. While we are in the community centre it's like we're still not really here yet. Like we're plants,' – she gestured out towards the back garden to clarify – 'still in pots. Without a mosque we can't really be here, we can't grow here, because there is no room for our roots.'

He handed her tea. There was something compelling about her metaphor. 'Perhaps you prefer mint tea?'

She shook her head and then, for the first time she met his eyes. 'I want to live here,' she said.

At first he was confused. Did she mean in this house? This neighbourhood?

'Holland,' she said. 'My husband, Youssef, and I want to live here but …'

'The mosque,' said Heico. Had this encounter been engineered somehow? No, that was impossible. And besides, he wasn't the decision maker. If they were going to engineer some type of encounter wouldn't they have done it with one of the councillors or the Mayor?

She lowered her eyes and then looked up again. 'This is where I live now. I can't go back.'

Heico nodded. 'I think …' he said, but he did not say any more. He didn't want to talk about the birds. The birds seemed oddly dimmed in his mind this morning. Or perhaps he was just tired.

She nodded as if to indicate that they had come to some sort of understanding and bent forward to stroke the dog. ‘It looks like you don’t need me today.’

Heico grimaced. ‘No. I forgot. We’ll still pay you of course.’

She seemed surprised by this but did not refuse.

‘Your Dutch…’ he said as he reached for his wallet. ‘You can really speak Dutch.’

‘I rode my bike,’ she said.

He smiled at her but she could see he did not understand. ‘My husband used to drive me. I took a bus to go home.’

Heico nodded. ‘Well, a bike will set you free.’ He reached for his wallet and looked inside. ‘I don’t have enough cash. I’ll have to pay you next time.’

She lowered her eyes to avoid his gaze. The wealthy never had any money; another irony of this country.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said.

She nodded and placed the tea glass on the table and stood to leave.

With a few long steps he reached the front door before her and turned back towards her blocking her exit for a moment. ‘I really am sorry,’ he said. His wallet was still in his hand and he patted it with contrition. And even so she was not quite sure what he was apologising for.

After the cleaner was gone, Heico spotted a copy of *Jane Eyre* on the bookshelf. A battered paperback with tiny font. It made him feel weary just looking at it. He was late for work but he slipped the novel into his satchel. He might get some time to start it later on.

December 2005

<> In Australia race riots break out on the beach in Sydney. <> Britain allows homosexual couples to form a ‘civil partnership’, the legal equivalent of the marriage already accessible to gay couples in Holland, Belgium, Spain and Canada. <> A Christmas appeal raises two million euro for Congolese children. <>

Imogen appeared in Heico's office doorway with a sheet of fax paper covered in dense black text. She waved it in his direction. 'Have you seen this?'

'No.'

'It says we provided misleading information to the media and local authorities about the mosque development.'

Heico puffed out his cheeks. He hoped to give the impression of indignation but he felt only a sense of inevitability.

Imogen leaned her weight on one foot and tilted the other so that only her toe touched the floor as if she were about to perform a dance. 'Did we?'

'You know what we gave them.'

'One: no I don't. Two: answer the question.'

'No, we didn't mislead them. Who wrote it?'

Imogen glanced at the page. 'Juliaan van der Linden,' she read.

He felt his face flush.

She stepped into his office now and approached his desk. 'You know him?'

'He's the journalist.'

'The gay guy?'

'Is he?'

She dropped the paper on to the desk between them.

'We never misled ...'

She leaned down, displaying her cleavage, and with a deliberate move she slid the page across the desk towards him. He skim-read the page as she moved toward the door. As she was leaving, she grabbed the doorframe and swung her body back into the room for a moment. 'You're reading *Jane Eyre*?'

'Has anyone else seen this?' he asked her.

Imogen arched her eyebrows and smiled a slow smile. 'And let's stop kidding ourselves that any of this is about the birds, shall we?' She swung herself back out of the office on the point of one high heel.

Heico could feel it slipping away, even as he sat in the high-back swivel chair and stared out across his desk, towards the pens of junior researchers, surveyors, and IT guys. They'd transfer him to some obscure post in the ministry to shuffle papers and sit in an office with a view of a wall. There would be no fieldwork, no doctoral students, only numbers in columns and meetings in airless rooms.

Heico crumpled the page and threw it in the paper-recycling bin under his desk.

On the train to The Hague, Heico sat with the book, unread, on his lap. He had tried to read it, but found he was always trying to guess what Eliza wanted him to be getting from it. Was she supposed to be Jane somehow? Was he one of the humourless, self-important men – and if so, which one? The book was bleak and he could only get through short sections at a time.

Outside the clouds hung low in bright 3D, like the world was a simulation too well rendered to be real: the sun shining on the wild-green meadow, a crow flung backwards by the rush of wind from the train and the patches of wild flowers and purple grasses laid out in uneven patches – the grasses almost yellow at the edges; the windmills whipping on and on in the background – their blades like demented gymnasts who couldn't seem to stop.

'There's something I want to show you,' said Onno, when Heico arrived at his office. 'No, keep your coat on.' Onno led him out of the building and across to the art gallery opposite.

Once they were inside Onno bounded up the staircase ahead of Heico. He led the way to a

painting of a European goldfinch perched on a ring protruding from a wall surrounding a wooden feeder box.

'I love this,' said Onno. 'You know that birds aren't my area of expertise, but this piece reminds me that every bird is a bird.' The absurdity of this statement seemed to strike him as the words came out of his mouth and he shrugged. They stood looking at it for a moment that was too long to be comfortable before Onno continued. 'So – I came here when the Mayor of some North Holland *gemeente* called me to ask why my team is making it difficult for his planning office to rubber stamp his mosque. And I came here in September when your subordinates emailed to say that you were prioritising meetings with the media over staff meetings. But, Heico,' and here Onno turned from the painting to look at Heico, 'last week I came here and I thought: it's just a bird. Like the chicken I had for dinner last night.'

Oddly, what sprang to Heico's mind was a bible passage echoing up from some forgotten Sunday: *I have counted the hairs on your head, says the Lord. Do not be afraid.* Heico swung his arm to indicate the finch in the painting. 'Dutch people used to eat these, too, not so long ago.'

Onno shook his head, perhaps to deny this, or perhaps to mourn the finches who had ended up on dinner tables across the country. Or perhaps Heico had misunderstood. He noticed now that the finch was chained to the ring on which it was perched.

'I think you've seen the fax I received yesterday?'

Heico's stomach seemed to dip further in his abdomen. He looked intently at the painting in front of them. 'I think so,' he said.

'Is it true?'

'The information we provided was unclear in its presentation. It wasn't untrue.'

'Meaning?'

'We dropped almost a decade worth of observations onto a single image and didn't tell the journalist what timeframe the data represented. He assumed it was a single year.' Heico felt Onno turn towards him, but he continued to study the bird, chained to the wall.

'A reasonable assumption?'

Heico nodded.

'And this data: how far has it been disseminated? Could the EU committee have seen it?'

'It's not impossible.'

Onno's voice registered impatience. 'Did you send it to them?'

Heico could feel the other people in the room begin to take a surreptitious interest in them. 'Why would I –?'

'Answer the question.'

'Of course not!'

Onno sighed. 'You generated the material that got our major funding proposal rejected.'

'I couldn't say for sure.'

'Oh my God! What do you think they saw? Maybe someone emailed it to them, maybe someone ran a search. It's not hard to find it out there, is it?'

Heico edged sideways as if another painting had caught his interest.

Onno followed him. 'This was our year, remember? This round? The Hoopoe Project was a perfect fit.'

Heico had a taste in his mouth that made him want to spit.

'Well, it's over,' said Onno more quietly now. 'Aline's seen the list. We're not on it.'

Heico looked up. Above them the ceiling was filled with a strange, dark landscape. He looked back down at Onno, who struck him, suddenly, as rather short.

'I'm sorry,' Heico said. 'The proposal threatened the sanctuary. I thought it would all blow over in a matter of weeks.'

Onno turned and gazed out the window, back towards his office. 'And now?'

'The stuff's been out there for years. With all the planning delays and –.'

'They're still meeting about this aren't they?'

'One more meeting. On Monday.'

'I'm going to withdraw our submission.'

Heico felt like Onno had thumped him in the chest. 'You're what? No. Just… The council's

information is accurate, it's only the newspaper…'

'I'm withdrawing it anyway.'

'Please.'

'I'm sure I don't have to say that you won't be attending the meeting. If you value your job, that is.'

'You're saying …?'

'I'm saying you won't be there.'

'No,' said Heico softly. 'I won't.'

Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the owners of the Elephant?
Did He not make their plot go astray? He sent against them birds, in flocks, striking them with stones of baked clay. And He made them like an empty field of stalks where the corn has been eaten by cattle.
Qur'an 105:1

The community tried, where we could, to smooth the frictions amongst our numbers. But these differences of opinion were not new to us. There were conservatives who felt the youth activities were inappropriate. And there were those that urged us to consider the broad sweep of the world outside our doors. 'How can we ignore it?' some of us would say and others would shake their heads. Discipline, they would say. Faithfulness. Submission.

'Hold firmly to the rope of Allah all together,' said the imam, 'and do not become divided.' He waved his hands in a gesture meant to indicate oneness and tolerance and giving everyone a little room to breathe. We knew he was right. If we were to prevail, there could be no fault lines in our presentation to the world. It was as simple as this: we did not agree on everything but for now we had to learn how to live like this or resign ourselves to fragmented home-prayer groups and the end of our dream of a centre to call our own. We had to remain united if the mosque was ever to become a reality and we knew that the mosque would solidify us and bring us together just as these intermediary problems were splintering us apart.

'The meeting is the council's first item of business on Monday,' said the imam. 'We can meet

afterwards for the midday prayer. Regardless of the outcome it will be good to join as a community for the *Zuhr*. We've come this far together and we'll continue together, no matter what is decided by the council.'

When Heico left his house on Monday morning the sun shone though the air was cold. The roads were clear and fringed with greying slush. In half an hour they would expect him in the office but he was cycling towards the city council office.

He did not plan to attend the meeting but he had texted Juliaan last night. He wanted to see him and it seemed important that he saw him before the meeting.

There had been no reply.

The bike-path had not been cleared and as Heico rode, the slush pile on the berm became higher and the roads icy. Eliza would be home in a couple of days, if she hadn't changed her flight that was. Heico knew that if he was going to speak to Juliaan about what had happened, about what next, it had to be now. The alternative was slipping back into a life of small violences that neither he nor Eliza meant to perpetuate against the other. His legs pumped harder, the cold stung his forehead, his nose ran and his ears ached.

Behind him, he felt the spectre of teenage bullies from his first days at high school; behind him the cage of cubicle-bound researchers squawking and squabbling amongst themselves – petty gossip and minor complaints about equipment and people who did not wash their dirty cups. His leg muscles burned as he pressed harder, racing past each cyclist who appeared in front of him.

He felt if he could just press on, he could put more things behind him: university, his mother's too-small apartment, his father who did not know what to say to him when he travelled half way across the world to see him, so that the two of them would sit on the veranda looking out at passing cars, and his dad would say 'Another one?' and gesture at his beer.

Now there were patches where Heico could get no traction at all and his tyres slid over the ice, but he rode on. Behind him his fragile marriage, his tenuous grip on his career. Behind him the mortgage, the meagre pay rises, Eliza's student debt. Behind him his childhood, the churches and those oversized Easter eggs.

On the edge of town, the sides of the roads were dyed in shades of pistachio and lavender where the city, out of *strooi* salt, had been forced to buy cheap bath salts to de-ice the roads.

Behind him was Onno, and Onno's own Onnos further up the chain. Behind him the emails and articles and enquiries; behind him Claartje's pink lipstick smile, Imogen's cardinal red couch and the jacket that he had left behind at her house last Christmas that he could no longer bring himself to wear.

And ahead was the future, whatever that was. Ahead was Juliaan and a mosque on the road beside the bird sanctuary. Ahead – however impossible it seemed – was summertime.

By the time he arrived, his face was numb and his muscles burned. His lungs were iced from the frigid air. As he rounded the council building he could see the lake, and at its edge, holding his arms wrapped around him against the cold, leaning against his car was the journalist who had called him the summer before last when Heico's world began to empty out and drain away. Juliaan whose face was rough and smooth at the same time; Juliaan whose own childhood had shadows and bullies; Juliaan who had betrayed him with a fax.

Heico leapt from his bike before it was stationary.

Juliaan waved his arm towards the council offices. 'We don't have long before…'

Nadia had not told Youssef she planned to attend the council meeting.

She had arrived by bicycle. The snow had turned the world clean, like a black and white photograph. She had begun to understand the winter: the way the air itself froze, sharp and crisp, and the way the slush melted so your shoes could fill unexpectedly with water from underneath the last icy snow.

She had arrived early. She wanted to be there when they opened the doors. Through the glass

she surveyed the space. An entrance hall and a waiting area, a little box that dispensed paper tickets and beyond that a row of booths for civil servants to take your money or process your paperwork: birth, death and each car, child, pet, poll and parking permit in between.

She had thought about coming here for many nights: sleepless and nervous, she had been unable to push aside her sense that she had to be here, that she had something she had to say. She had decided to bring her voice to the public forum, just as her teachers had encouraged them, just as the imam had called for. She would join them, and – now – they would hear and understand her.

By the time a young man unlatched the doors, a small crowd had gathered – men and women in business-wear – with somewhere else to be. Nadia stepped back to allow them in before her. One gentleman nodded his thanks, lowering his eyes.

Nadia felt her body move, fluid under her loose clothing. Her muscles strong, her purpose clear, her routine rehearsed in her head until she had not been able to sleep from the repetition of it. They had told her – if she were to show up in their midst, if she presented herself in a self-assured way – she would be heard, and they would benefit from her courage.

A woman dressed in a beige skirt suit floated past. '*Alles OK, mevrouw*?'

'*Ja, hoor*,' she replied. Her voice was strange in her own ears. The bureaucrat continued on, glancing behind as she went.

Nadia looked around. The colours ran together like a child's painting left in the rain. Blues and greens swam in a wall mural of the sky and the earth and the waters below. She remembered the teacher telling them that this part of the country was lower than the sea, kept dry only by their complicated system of canals and sluices. But where was there to go once the water got in?

Her life here had been leading to this. In this moment, as strange as it seemed, she was where Allah had placed her: child of God, daughter of man, foreigner and bearer of truth.

On the other side of the council offices, the lake was frozen over and families were teaching their smallest members to skate on the uneven ice. Fathers stood, their arms folded, their eyes following their Bambi-legged children looping around the ice with wooden chairs. On the side, where the lake

butted up against private back yards, homeowners had set up portable stoves and sat on deck chairs selling soup and hot chocolate in paper cups. Was it school holidays? They seemed to come around much more frequently than when Heico was in school.

He ran his hand over his forehead, still numb from the ride. He was here because he had glimpsed something in himself that he couldn't ignore. His body buzzed and his skin stung. The world was small, and almost silent, with only the occasional sound from the highway or the families on the ice carrying in the cold, singing air. There was no going back.

'I wasn't sure if you would come,' Heico said.

Juliaan held his arm in front of him, palm out, keeping Heico at bay. 'They axed that Mormon show they wanted me to cover.'

Heico turned towards his bike to flick the stand into place with his foot. '*Quelle surprise!*'

'It was supposed to be my first international job.'

This was not the conversation Heico had been expecting to have. 'You wanted to write filler for the free newspapers they hand out to commuters?'

'I wanted to write for someone other than a middle-class, university-educated, canal-house male between the ages of thirty-five and fifty-five.'

'Change newspapers!'

'Have you ever thought how small the Netherlands is?'

'All the time!'

Juliaan took this in. 'I want to work on something bigger.'

'Then tell them you'll be a war correspondent.'

'No, like ... forget it. It doesn't matter. There'll be other gigs.' Juliaan straightened. 'We only have a few minutes before this meeting.'

'I've said all I want to say to them. They have all the information.'

Juliaan shrugged, then shivered. 'It's wrong. The birds are a lie – not for you perhaps, but for every xenophobe from here to Brussels. You have to stop giving them excuses to hide behind.'

As if in refutation, from the other side of the lake, came the call of a single jackdaw.

Heico's brain felt like it was disintegrating from the outside. 'Why did you meet me here?'

'To ask you to walk away from this now. It's the right thing to do and you know it.'

Juliaan had come to meet him, but it meant nothing.

'It must be your lucky day: my boss has forbidden me to go.'

'What?'

'He threatened to fire me.'

'He can't ... So what are you doing here then?'

'The other night …' Heico said, Eliza's arrival imminent, his mind desperate.

Juliaan's face greyed. Heico could see he understood then, but Juliaan hadn't come for this.

'No,' Juliaan said. 'I'm sorry.'

'That's all?'

'Yes. No. I'm sorry.'

'You're a coward.'

'No,' said Juliaan, softly.

Heico wished he would reach out a hand.

'I've been here before. It doesn't mean what you think it does.'

Heico leaned his body towards him, as if he could detain him this way.

'You're going through something – I don't know what it is but what happened – it's not really about me. It's about you and you know it. Look, I have to go to this meeting.' Juliaan waved his gloved hand towards the council office. 'You should go to work.'

'Is it Daan?' asked Heico but Juliaan didn't answer. He pressed the button on his key ring to lock his car and began to walk towards the council building, leaving Heico to slump over his bike frame. He pressed his fists against his eyelids until he saw geometric patterns. For a moment the lake and square were empty with the cloud low and the jackdaw still calling across the water's frozen surface.

He looked up into the sky. There was no chance that Eliza was on the plane flying overhead but still he felt himself shudder into a sort of reality that perhaps he had lost sight of. He looked out

towards the *gemeentehuis*, in the direction that Juliaan just left him, and he knew that he had to be there. Even if it was futile, he needed to attend the last meeting.

'I'm surprised to see you here Mr Brandsma,' said the Mayor when Heico entered. Whether Onno had spoken directly to the Mayor or whether the Mayor simply didn't like people to show up after he had made his own entrance Heico wasn't sure. Heico smiled what he hoped was a condescending smile and sat down in the last available place at the conference table.

'Saved you a seat,' whispered Salema, to his right. He felt her generosity as a tightness behind his breastbone.

The room was fuller than it had been before, filled well beyond its capacity. People leaned against the walls and the space by the window had been filled with chairs, from the *trouwzaal* next door, lined up in rows. All the councillors would be here, even those who had shown no interest in the matter before. There appeared to be more representatives than before from the Muslim community too. Heico guessed that many of them had rarely, if ever, been inside this building.

Across from him, Juliaan would not meet his eyes but it didn't matter. Regardless of what the decision was, this was the end. Heico would not have to meet with him, or any of these people again. He looked around the table now but they were all cardboard cut-outs of themselves – barely present at all. None of it mattered now. The decision would have been made – in a back room somewhere – weeks, if not months ago. He was not as naïve as he once had been.

'Let's get started, then,' said Peter. Heico wondered if he was married. No, he thought, then, yes. He had the flatness of a married man: a man with a lunchbox.

The agenda indicated that the architect would speak first. Heico glanced sideways at Salema and saw that the over-full room was not what she had expected. She shuffled her notes and glanced around but when the Major indicated she should speak she got to her feet and moved to the end of the table to more easily address the whole room.

'Buildings are about what it means to be human: how we move through space and meet each other. In the case of this one: it's about how we can reach beyond this temporal, spatial realm towards

something more than our usual experience, how we can spend time with the transcendent.

'For me, this is a project that has come to represent more than all the hours I have put into our design. It has called on all my education and accumulated expertise; my childhood memories of God and community and my memories of Turkey – where both of my parents were born. I have incorporated echoes of places I have never been and of times long before I was born. I have spent many months thinking about how men and women today might want to interact with each other and with God.' Salema nodded towards the men and women in the seats by the window. 'I am not part of this community – but I have been repeatedly asked to defend this mosque. I don't even know how to begin. For me, my design work is my full argument: environmental, social, religious. I have put my every defence into the building itself. I do not believe it will have an adverse effect on birds of any type and I do not believe the building clashes with the socio-cultural values of the land or compromises the historical sites nearby. On the contrary, I believe the mosque will be attractive, unobtrusive and that it will bring benefits in terms of stimulating the local economy. It will open up new ways for people to interact with one another: the association has proposed an extensive community integration and outreach program including an educational program for school groups and a program to help low-income families in the area which will be open not just to Muslims but to anyone in need.. The mosque will bring revenue to the council in terms of paid parking if there is any overflow from what we have allowed for onsite – which we believe should be more than sufficient for the first five to ten years, and we have proposed a slight revision to local bus routes to better serve the needs of worshippers and other visitors.

'I feel that this mosque would be an unambiguous benefit to the area but,' and here she closed her notes and looked across to the members of the council, 'that is ultimately for you to decide.'

Heico heard her exhale softly as she slipped back into her seat.

The imam spoke next. He said something resigned-sounding about a society in which everyone was entitled to a place to live and thrive. He glanced around himself as he spoke: aware, no doubt, that it made no difference what he said now. And still he spoke on. When he took his seat there was a moment's pause.

'If I could…' a woman in a hijab spoke from the end of the table. She looked familiar though Heico could not remember a Muslim woman, other than Salema, attending these meetings before. 'I wanted to tell you what this mosque would mean,' she said. Her Dutch was imperfect in the way of immigrants and she faltered now, looking down as if perhaps she regretted speaking at all and it was then that Heico recognised her. Nadia, the cleaner.

The Mayor shuffled his papers in front of him but Peter nodded for her to speak. 'Please be brief,' he said. 'Our time is limited.'

Nadia's vision darkened and she thought for a moment she might faint. Her arms trembled and her skin was damp. She could not recall when she had ever felt so cold, but she was here now. She bit her lower lip and her vision sharpened. This moment would never present itself again. She would speak.

She paused to gather herself. 'I wanted to tell you that this building is not just a place for prayer. It is a centre, like a home. A place to return to, a place you know you will always be welcome. A place where you can …' she seemed to search for the correct word, 'where you can rest.' She stood for a moment longer and the attention of the room remained on her but she merely bowed her head and sat down again.

The Mayor nodded to acknowledge her unsolicited comment and then spread his arms wide as he took the floor. He spoke of values and the environment. He looked above them all, dreaming perhaps of another posting, in The Hague or Brussels. He smiled and brought his arms together as if gathering his constituents into a municipal embrace. 'And so,' he said, 'now that we have heard what everyone has to say we must take a vote.'

The members of the *gemeenteraad* followed the Mayor out of the room with Peter leaving last, scanning his eyes over the crowded space for anyone who might have forgotten they were required to vote.

Heico did not dare to meet the eyes of anyone else in the room. It wouldn't do to be caught hoping too much. After a moment's silence people began to murmur softly to their neighbours but

Salema and Heico did not speak and Juliaan, across the room, appeared to be lost in thoughts of his own.

The Mayor returned with the air of someone who has dispensed with an unwelcome duty. Peter seemed downcast, as he slipped back into his seat, but Heico did not know what these things might mean. Only three of the other councillors returned to the room, the others, apparently having concluded that their role in the matter was concluded, had perhaps decided to take an early lunch.

'We do apologise for the timeline' said the Mayor without resuming his seat. 'It has not been a straight-forward process, as you can appreciate, and we have not taken this decision lightly.' He paused and Heico could see him savour the intensity of interest fixed on him in the room. Perhaps this mosque thing had had its advantages. 'Peter,' said the Mayor, 'if you would…' and now he sat, and bowed his head as if to withdraw himself from the announcement and any fall-out that might ensue from whatever decision had been reached in the back room.

Peter stood. He seemed uncomfortable, as if he had selected an ill-fitting pair of shoes this morning. 'The decision has been taken…' he reached for the glass on the desk in front of him and took a sip before proceeding, 'not to approve the mosque development in the proposed location.'

A silence followed this that made Heico's ears ring. He could feel the eyes of the room on him. He looked down at the table. He wanted to say 'thank you' but he knew that neither the councillors nor the others in the room would appreciate this. It was not a favour done for him; it was just bureaucracy. Anything that might be seen to be gloating was to be avoided.

In fact, other than simple gratitude, Heico felt mostly tired. He hadn't slept well the night before, nor indeed had he been sleeping well generally since Eliza left. And now the cold, Juliaan's indifference, Onno's anger and the EU's rejection of their proposal all seemed to conspire to make him feel that if only he could fall asleep until winter was over, perhaps he might wake up to a bright new future. Heico raised his head and looked around, but everyone seemed very far away.

Peter turned his attention briefly to Heico before addressing the room more generally. 'There is no single reason for our decision. We had a number of submissions from interested parties and you will be able to read our analysis in our final report. The *gemeente* is willing to buy the block from the

community at the value they paid five years ago, indexed for inflation, or they may sell it independently at their discretion.'

Heico did not know if it was in his head or outside of him but there seemed to rise a strange, collective mew of loss, though no individual seemed to be making a sound.

Peter shook his head, as if he heard it too. 'We would appreciate it if you could respect that this has been a difficult process for us all. We have tried to honour the best interests of our community and to make a decision in such a way that we can justify our reasoning locally, nationally and, if necessary, to the EU.' Here he nodded at the Mayor, as if he already represented Brussels' power here in this little corner of the country. 'We appreciate that there will be disappointment and inconvenience for a number of parties in this room today and we sincerely apologise for that.'

Had he rehearsed this? Heico wondered. He appeared uncomfortable, but the words seemed to come to him without trouble. The decision seemed to have given Peter a self-possession that Heico had not seen in him before. Heico sought Salema's eyes, but her gaze was lowered. She wore a dark emerald hijab and her face seemed hooded and empty. Her mosque was gone, as fleeting as the desert sand dune it was designed to resemble. And when he thought of the site it seemed strangely empty now that the prospect of the mosque no longer stood there, above the grasses, between the trees. They would build somewhere else perhaps. A new architect; a new location; a new design.

Peter sighed now, as if in a sort of bodily apology. 'The timing has played a role, of course. National events affected the mind-set of those who live in this area as they have affected the whole country. This is unfortunate for the applicants but these considerations were unavoidable for us. We certainly hope that this chapter – of violence and mistrust – is now behind us and that it will not affect any further planning application made by the association here or elsewhere.' And now he seemed to have run out of words. Still Peter remained standing, as if he expected some response and did not want to face it seated, but none came and so he sat down with a nod to hand the floor back to the Mayor.

'The decision that has been taken is to be considered final; however, responses can be submitted in writing for inclusion in our report, should you so desire. I wish to add our sincere good

wishes to the association and our hope for your success with the next location you might choose to build.' The Mayor gathered his paper together in front of him. 'If no one wishes to respond now?' he said hopefully.

Several people shook their heads.

'Excellent,' he said, and the celebration of this word choice echoed awkwardly around the room. 'Well, then,' he said more softly. He nodded to the minute taker. 'Let's close.'

Nadia's clothes seemed heavy and she felt as her seat might swallow her. She looked at the clock. It was almost time for midday prayer. She pushed down on the armrests of her chair to lift herself. Through the meeting room door she could see the cavernous space between the row of service counters and the waiting area where a handful of people sat with paper tickets clutched in their hands, their bodies slumped in resigned patience, their eyes cast ever-upwards towards the screen watching for their number to come up. The meeting had run longer than any of them had expected. Nadia stopped beside the architect – still seated, blank-faced at the table. 'You should join us for the *Salat*. People will want to thank you,' she said to Salema.

Salema nodded to accept the invitation. 'Of course,' she said, though it had been a long time since she had attended Friday prayer.

Heico stood without speaking to anyone. Salema, watching him saw his countenance pale and followed his gaze. The journalist was striding across the room towards them, side-stepping concerned citizens as he went. She stood up beside Heico and stepped in to obstruct Juliaan's path. 'You should come too,' she said to Heico. 'You can stand on the side. I think it might be good for you to be there.'

He glanced across at Nadia who, seeing him looking at her, nodded a solemn-faced acknowledgement. 'Yes,' said Heico, barely glancing up towards Juliaan arriving behind Salema. 'I'd like to come.'

And then, the air raid sirens sounded. Midday, the first Monday of the month. Heico scooped up his briefcase and walked out through the glass doors.

At the entrance to the community centre Heico removed his shoes. He took a place on the side of the room next to where two older men, too frail to perform the physical movements of the prayer, had been given chairs. The mufti, seeing Heico, acknowledged him with an incline of his head. A moment later Peter slipped in beside Heico, nodding a discreet greeting. He seemed shorter without his shoes.

A male voice rose up to start the verse – and the other voices joined in. '*Subhana-ka-llahu-mma wa bihamdi-ka wa tabaraka-smu-ka wa ta'ala jaddu-ka wa la ilaha ghairu-ka.'*

For Salema the words spoken all around her were comfortable and familiar. The standing and kneeling and bowing felt so familiar that her body recalled the prayer before her mind did, and the movements felt like returning home. Slowly, as the prayer proceeded, a quietness rose up in her that she did not remember feeling in a long time. She thought of the words spoken by the woman now standing beside her, the woman who had said the mosque would be a home. Salema knew that, though she had spent many hours designing, defending and advocating for the mosque, for her no one building alone would ever feel like home.

And for Heico the light, reflected from the frozen lake and the snow, streamed in through the long windows on the opposite side of the room and his mind was peaceful and blank. He did not reach for the prayers and incantations of childhood. Instead he allowed the rhythm and texture of the words recited before him to fill his mind. He felt the carpet through his socks and he felt connected to the world through the floor beneath his feet and in this moment what rose up for him – through his legs and into his abdomen, chest, arms and head was a feeling of joy. This was over now. He allowed the words to course through him, the rhythm hypnotic, reassuring and certain. He wanted the moment to hold – with the bright, white light and the waves of voices and the feeling of being precisely where he should be. He didn't know if there were answers here but, he thought, if he could keep his mind silent, he might be able to live without answers in this place and in this now, stretching out and out in every direction.

No one seemed surprised at Heico's late arrival and no one enquired about the outcome of the meeting. His office felt smaller and shabbier than it had seemed to him before. There were scuff marks on the walls he'd never noticed and the papers on his desk seemed brittle and old.

Heico closed his door and dialled Eliza's number. He woke her but she didn't seem to mind. He put her on speaker while he cleared his desk. 'I just want someone to tell me I did the right thing,' he said.

For a moment there was a silence on the line. 'You did the only thing you could do.'

Heico stopped in his tracks to the filing cabinet and turned back to look at the phone.

'I mean it,' she said. 'You did the right thing.'

Heico shuddered. 'I can't stay here,' he said.

'I know,' said Eliza. 'It's OK. You'll work it out.'

Heico nodded opening and closing his desk drawers. 'Yeah, well. This is done here. I've got to call Onno.' He opened the filing cabinet and dumped the contents of his 'in' tray into the first unlabelled file.

'I'm calling to resign,' Heico said when Onno picked up the phone. 'Effective immediately.'

'Yes,' Onno said, more gently than Heico had anticipated. 'I'm sorry to lose you, but ...'

'I am thinking of moving too.' This last was something Heico hadn't known until he said it. It wasn't about the birds or the mosque; it was just too small. Too small for him and too small for Eliza.

'Moving? Where?' said Onno, a politeness Heico wasn't owed, but perhaps Onno was caught

off guard; or maybe he was just grateful that Heico was leaving of his own volition.

'I don't know,' said Heico. 'Somewhere else.'

'Well you're lucky, in a way,' said Onno. 'Everywhere has birds, everywhere has sky.'

Nadia did not like to lie to Youssef but she saw no option.

'I called my mother,' she said. 'Later I fell asleep.' This was an odd lie but one he was unlikely to question. Still she added: 'I didn't sleep well last night.' And this, at least, was true.

He looked at her with an expression she couldn't quite read.

'You were at the meeting,' he said. 'At the council offices. I would have come with you if I'd known you were planning to go.'

The thought of this – together with having been caught in a lie – was sickening. She felt light-headed.

'The mosque,' she said.

'Kadim called. He told me what you did. I'm proud of you. That sounds wrong, but I am.' He looked like he wanted to say more but he seemed to have run out of words.

She lowered her eyes and then raised them to his.

'I had to,' she said. She was not defending her actions, only stating a fact. There was no one else. The others had been caught up in bylaws and traffic plans. They'd been working on it so long they'd forgotten what it really meant, the mosque, what it would have been for them all.

'I'm proud of you,' Youssef said again.

Her eyes stung. Youssef moved toward her until he was holding her and her tears were dampening his clothes.

'We will find another location. Allah is with the patient,' said Youssef. He touched his fingers to her hair.

It had been a long day. ‘It’s just … This one meant something to me. The plans, all the waiting, even the birds. I’ve watched the birds. Some nights I dreamt it was already built and I was inside it and I felt peaceful …with the light streaming down from above, like in the pictures. I wanted to feel that.’

She could see he was starting to understand.

‘I didn’t know,’ he said. ‘There’s nothing I could have done, but I didn’t know.’

Youssef made her sit down. He brought her tea and she sipped it slowly. Sweet like at home.

‘I can’t clean for him anymore.’

Youssef’s face showed only confusion.

‘Mr Brandsma. They won. I can’t go back there.’

It was clear that he did not follow, but still he said: ‘You don’t have to go back if you don’t want to.’

But she knew that they couldn’t afford for her not to.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘About the mosque. About everything.’ But there was nothing he could do.

The following day, the city newspaper printed its retraction. They printed two maps – one with almost a full decade's migratory trajectories shown and one with a single flight tracked over the site in the most recent migration season and a block of text – written, Heico imagined, by Juliaan – explaining the difference. He did not know where Juliaan got the second image from and he did not very much care.

Heico's mobile phone rang all morning. Journalists from national papers, perhaps, keen to pick up the story. He didn't pick up the phone. Let them call Juliaan, if they wanted the story.

Later, when the other calls had died down, Juliaan himself called. Heico stared at his name on his telephone display but he didn't answer and Juliaan did not leave a message.

Nadia had asked Youssef to call Eliza Brandsma to say she was sick and could not clean for them today but, though he had tried to call her several times, he had not managed to reach her. Mr Brandsma would be at work anyway, Youssef had said. So Nadia was at the Brandsmas' home just three days after the council's decision to reject the mosque proposal.

The house was empty and felt like it had been empty for a few days. The living room was untidier than usual and the rest of the house appeared to have been untouched since she was last here. Beds made, bins empty. Was he sleeping on the couch? And where was Eliza? There hadn't been any sign of her for weeks.

And then, through the window, Nadia saw Heico returning home, a supermarket bag hung from his handlebar. He was wearing weekend clothing: jeans, running shoes and a bulky jacket. He caught sight of her through the window and raised his hand in a cheery greeting as if he had forgotten the events of a few days ago and indeed as he opened the front door he called out brightly as if they were old friends. But once he was inside, facing her, his face fell and he readjusted his features. 'I am sorry,' he said.

She nodded. Looking at him, she felt grief for the loss of the mosque. They'd try again elsewhere, Youssef had said. Or another association would try to build a mosque in a bordering *gemeente* that might be more sympathetic to their cause. But this mosque had been in the planning since she had arrived in Holland and she had taken comfort in those artist sketches on the noticeboard at the community centre. The designs had been like no mosque she had seen before and at the same time like a picture of some future place where, she knew, she could be a part of a community again.

She switched on the vacuum cleaner and began to clean, facing away from Heico though she

could feel him behind her still, standing in the doorway. The noise of the vacuum filled the space around her so she didn't have to speak to him. After a while he turned away. When she had run out of floor to vacuum she flicked the switch and began winding the cord up.

'No more time today,' she said when he appeared again in the same doorway, as she had known he would. These were not the type of people who left things unsaid.

'Thank you, Nadia,' he said.

The use of her name tricked her into looking up to meet his eye.

'I want you to feel at home here. I want you …' he must have caught the confusion on her face '… to feel at home in Holland. I am sorry.'

'You are not sorry,' she said. She meant no accusation; it was a simple fact.

'It is what I wanted for the birds. But I am sorry that it is not simpler to relocate the plans for the mosque.'

She turned to straighten a chair she had moved while vacuuming. There was no point in talking about any of it. It was too late. She should probably tell him he would need to find another cleaner but instead she found herself saying: 'You aren't at work?'

'I quit.' His hand closed into a fist at his side. 'Sort of.'

She shook her head. It was difficult to understand why they would fire this man who had given them what they all apparently wanted.

'Well,' she said. 'I'll see you next week perhaps, unless …' she wondered if perhaps now they wouldn't be able to afford her services.

'Yes. Next week. Maybe come early so we'll have time for a coffee,' he said pulling cash to cover this and the previous week's pay from his wallet and handed it to her.

Perhaps by next week she'd be ready to talk to him.

'OK,' she said. She reached for one of the colloquialisms the teacher had taught her: '*we gaan een bakje doen*.' We'll have coffee.

He laughed aloud, his mouth open, a generous, congratulatory laugh. '*We gaan inderdaad een bakje doen*,' he confirmed.

Nadia gathered her bag from where she had left it on the kitchen bench.

'Wait,' Heico said. 'I have something for you.' He stood up and went into the back room. In the bottom of the cupboard in the spare room was the antique snow globe he had bought with the circling birds instead of snow. He had planned to give it to Eliza when she became Dutch, but it seemed like she had no plans to naturalise. Perhaps she wasn't planning to come back at all.

'It's pretty,' said Nadia when he handed it to her, the birds already aloft and descending softly. She watched it until they had settled and then she reached out and placed it on the bench between them.

'It's for you,' Heico said. 'I want you to have it.'

Nadia shrugged. 'Thank you,' she said. She gathered it into her hands, wrapping her fingers around the glass. He did not know if she was pleased or not but she took the gift, tucking it carefully into her bag as she left.

Four separate envelopes addressed to Nadia arrived in the mail on the same day. Her exam results. Though she felt anxious about their contents, she liked the way the envelopes looked with her name and address printed on the label. The very repetition of them seemed to affirm her existence here. She lined them up on the dining room table, unopened, and looked at them for a long time. The feeling in her chest might have been fear but she thought that it felt more like excitement. If she had passed all four she could get a job in an office or a shop, or apply to go to college. Though she had no intention of doing these things, somehow the possibility of these four envelopes made her feel a little dizzy.

'I want a house with a garden,' Nadia said to Youssef when he returned from work that evening. 'A house on the ground.'

Youssef looked at her and she kept her gaze steady.

She thought of her mother planting vegetables. Nadia wanted to step out of her house and feel the earth beneath her feet. She wanted to be able to dig into the soil, to gather things that they had planted: vegetables, herbs, flowers.

Youssef glanced around their apartment as if he hadn't really seen it in a while. She watched him take in the flowers in jars, the few cushions she had purchased. He ran his fingers over the cloth on the table between them, perhaps noticing it for the first time.

'OK. If that's what you want.' He smiled an uncertain smile.

She thought of children in the garden. She thought of him teaching them to play *voetbal*. She looked at his dark hair, his skin, so much paler than her brothers': winter pale.

'What are these?' he said, reaching for the envelopes at the end of the table.

'My exam results.'

'You passed?' he said. 'All of them?'

She nodded. 'Even the oral.'

'I knew it!' he said

And somehow this was the moment that it seemed real to her: her life here with him, the city around them. I love him, she realised. She flushed at the foolishness of this unexpected thought.

'What is it?' Youssef asked.

Nadia's gaze fell on the snow globe Mr Brandsma had given her, now sitting on top of the entertainment unit. 'Do you know how to ice-skate?'

The airport terminal pulsed and rang. Outside the aeroplanes rolled by, one by one, on their way to every other place.

Heico's long strides carried him past shops bursting with souvenirs and wrapped cheeses, wooden tulips in faux Delft-blue vases, piles of books and racks of magazines, alcohol, perfume, chocolate, textiles, electronics: bright and over-packaged. The shops and public areas were heavy with Christmas decorations: plastic pine branches and stiff, oversized ribbons in scarlet and gold. He had not noticed the prayer room before, but as he passed it now he glimpsed a handful of shoes just inside the glass doors.

The year they'd first met, Eliza and he were the only ones who had stayed in student housing over Christmas: Eliza because her family didn't celebrate Christmas and Heico because he had nowhere to go. The other exchange students had decided to go to Canada but Heico had run out of money. He hadn't noticed Eliza much before then. He knew her name, that was all. But now Eliza and he made a thing of 'skipping Christmas': they bought in weird junk foods (weird to him at least – Eliza seemed only to think them odd Christmas fare) and they watched films in the common room, each occupying a whole couch, heating turned high. Outside the whole world was empty: the college, the classrooms, the shops and museums – everything was deserted. They had fun; so much so that he found he was sorry when the others began to return – overfed and non-communicative – on the twenty-sixth. Nothing was really said between them but a week later they were a couple and it felt so

natural that no one around them seemed to notice that this pairing was something new, as if it had always been so. And so it felt to him as well – then and still.

He and Eliza hadn't spoken in over a week – he kept missing her when he called – but he had come anyway. Maybe she would be on the flight, the one she had originally booked, and perhaps she had changed it, as she had mentioned she might. He wanted to be here to meet her if she came; he wouldn't tell her he had been here if she did not.

He'd brought *Jane Eyre* with him. He wanted to finish it before she got home – a gesture she hoped she'd appreciate. At a café in the arrivals hall – an empty coffee cup in front of him, his body swivelled to watch the arriving passengers – he read distractedly. He had been sitting there long enough for his hopes of Eliza emerging through the doors to begin to fade when he reached the passage she had meant for him to find.

I am no bird, he read and he remembered her speaking these odd words to him weeks before. A cold certainty washed over him as he read on.

I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you.

She was leaving him. Heico felt his body shudder. The two of them had come so far, and now here he was in an airport cafe clutching a cheap paperback. When he stood up his body felt stiff as if he had been sitting for many days. The colours around him seemed gaudy and the cacophony devoid of meaning – just sounds and clanging – empty noise.

He no longer looked for her as he walked toward the exit.

'I am no bird,' she'd said to him, sending him on a cryptic treasure hunt from the other side of the Atlantic, and this was its end point. Why not come here and say what she meant, in person? And, after all, why not just wait? It was over now, wasn't it: his job, the mosque, the awkward social situations – all the things she objected to about this whole thing? He had nothing keeping him here now. They could move, if that's what she wanted, but she wasn't giving him the option. Just this cruel, slow riddle to end their marriage.

When he got to his car, with a paper ticket from the parking machine clamped in his hand, a

wave of anger seized him as he pulled the car door closed behind him. And then he was clawing her paperback apart – a foolish gesture, that left his lap, and the floor, and dashboard littered with the yellowed pages and the angry, tight rows of type. It was over and he was the self-satisfied Rochester after all, now alone in a concrete car park. She wasn't coming, today or ever. That was clear now. And so, his as arms heavy as if he'd received an electric shock, he drove through the boom gates and out under the low, white sky.

On his way home, Heico stopped by the sanctuary. The sky was wide and empty, and the air vibrated with the coming snow. His body was full of pent-up energy so he got out of the car and walked out towards the sea. A coldness seeped into his body despite his heavy jacket. He shivered and wrapped his arms around himself. The earth tilted a little further around the sun and the light shifted.

On the final rise he stopped and looked out over the sand towards the water and as he stood there it began to snow. He jammed his hands into his pockets and watched the falling universe.

He thought of the snow globe he had given to the housekeeper, with the birds that swirled all around. For a while he watched the snow disappear as it touched the water's surface and the sea pulsing softly on. The sky above was empty, the world was silent and the snow fell in thick, felted clumps. The dunes, behind him were still and the graves – unforgotten – lay silent beneath the snow. And as he stood there snow began to gather on the surface of the sea.

A sanderling – its rounded body flecked with snowflakes – skittered along the sea's edge following the water line as the waves went in and out. The bird and the thrum of the sea under its cover of snow drifts, that converging and fragmenting over and over, were the only things that moved. Even his heartbeat felt muted. The snow caught on his eyelashes and held in his hair. The world was a spinning globe of snow and earth and sand and sea, so much bigger than him. Than all of them.

The sanderling took to the sky and Heico watched it fly, back toward the trees, towards the others. He watched it and then he brushed the snow from his hair and pulled up the hood of his coat. The thing was to stay aloft; that was something the birds had taught him. He turned towards the town.

There was work to be done, maybe there would still be work for him in the South, on the rivers, and today's light was already beginning to fade.

Indeed I have come to you with a sign from your Lord

in that I design for you from clay that which is like the form of a bird,

then I breathe into it and it becomes a bird by permission of Allah.

Qur'an 3:49

I returned to the block – for the first time in months – a few days after the final meeting at the council office. Foot traffic had created paths through the snow-covered grasses to the water's edge and across to the trees. I did not know whose footprints these were but no one person had made these tracks alone: evidently there had been several visitors in the last few days.

I lingered a while until the calm of the place had settled the rush of thoughts in my head and I heard the call of a songbird and the sound of the breeze between the trees. In as far as this place had ever belonged to us, it wouldn't for much longer. But it certainly was Allah's and would remain so despite a hundred meetings, a thousand reports.

And if He wanted it for His birds, who were we to complain?

Note

There are three parables retold in this manuscript. The story of Solomon and the hoopoes' golden crowns is part of both the Islamic and the Jewish traditions. The grapes story comes from Rumi. The bird 'rescued' from the cow dung is a loose retelling of an old Buddhist story.

Representations of Islamic Migration in Three Works of Contemporary Fiction:

Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup*, Michael Mohammed Ahmad's *The Tribe* and Amy Waldman's *The Submission*

INTRODUCTION

In the northern hemisphere summer of 2012 I spent six weeks in the USA and while there I heard the story of a mosque planned for Golita, just outside Santa Barbara, California. By the time I heard the story, the Muslim community in Santa Barbara had owned the land for the mosque for eleven years. They had architectural drawings that incorporated the 'Spanish Mission' style characteristic of the area and a group of worshippers who were bursting out of the community centre where they held their Friday prayers, but they had not been able secure sufficient community support to get the building permit they needed to begin construction.

By 2012 they had encountered many different objections to the plan. The one that interested me was there had been concern raised that the migratory path of a certain species of bird would be obstructed by the planned mosque. At one point the flight paths of these birds had been posted on the internet but by the time I heard the story these images had been taken down. Advocates for the birds spoke at the community meetings that followed in the years after. This story essentially forms the central conflict in my novel, although the situation has been transported to the Netherlands where I lived during most of the period in which my novel plays out. I do not see myself as re-telling the Golita mosque story but, rather, using it to explore religion, science, environmentalism and the changing population demographics of Western countries in the face of world trends in immigration.

Reading migration fiction

Homi Bhabha's conceptualisation of Third Space is probably still the most influential theoretical approach to understanding the dynamic relationship that opens up as cultures evolve and change through processes in which people and cultures meet and influence each other, including those triggered by colonisation. Bhabha, and those who have followed him, discuss the "third space" between an established culture and the culture of a newly arrived immigrant – as a space of meeting, change and expansion which produces something wholly new – not directly arising from either culture individually but from the interface between them. Gerhard Wagner notes that for Bhabha 'national identity can only be thought of as the result of a negotiation that emerges in a third space between dominant elites, who speak for the majority of the people, and newly arrived minorities' (161). As a result of these transactions there is no pure culture but only culture resulting from these processes.

Julia Lossau notes that the project of reconceptualising cultural identities in terms of a spatial construct 'allows for the coexistence of different things – be it narratives, cultures, knowledge or identities – at the same time' (63) though, as she notes, this is not without its own complexities and contradictions.

While immigrants, living and working in a new country, are often regarded in some sense as 'hybrids' living between two worlds, Bhabha disturbs this concept observing that: 'the third space is a challenge to the limits of the self in the act of reaching out to what is liminal … in the cultural representation of other peoples, times, languages, texts' ('Cave of Making' xiii). As a result 'borderline existences…are linked to concepts of multiple identities which depict subjects as able to partake in different cultures at the same time' (Lossau 65). Protagonists of postcolonial texts, with their 'unstable positionalities … dissolve the boundaries between cultures and nations that have gone unquestioned for a long time [and in] their practices of traveling and border crossing, a new space is opened up' (Lossau 65). This observation describes all of the main protagonists of the texts discussed in this exegesis. Though the 'border crossings' take a number of different forms in the various texts, and certainly not all are literally spatial, Bhabha's influential ideas give us a spatial metaphor that has

become almost a reflex for discussing the way that protagonists are 'located' with respect to the cultures and identities of their forebears, their families, their (new) communities and neighbours and the broader world around them.

Interestingly this is echoed by Salman Rushdie in his influential though less academic essay, *Imaginary Homelands,* in which he reflects on writing as someone who is located between cultures: 'Our identity [as writers who straddle two cultures] is at once plural and partial… Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy' (15). Rushdie's shift from straddling two existing cultures to a metaphor invoking the existence of new 'ground' or 'territory' reflects Bhabha's movement from hybridity to a third space between cultures which Rushdie finds a productive space from which to write. Those who exist in this territory, Rushdie argues, 'are inescapably international writers at a time when the novel has never been a more international form' (20).

Bhabha and Rushdie are in agreement that in this new territory, in Bhabha's words, 'the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity of fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew' (37), and, as Rushdie points out, in translation things are as likely to be gained as lost.

In the course of my reading of migrant novels, I noticed that there seemed to be three phases into which migrant stories tended to fall. The first phase I have called *'finding a new place to call home.'* This phase encompasses the relocation and search for a new home of the first-generation migrant. In Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn* (2009) for example, Eilis Lacey relocates from Ireland to New York in the 1950s in order to find work. Initially she is homesick and she finds herself at the bottom of the pecking order as the newcomer at her boarding house, but she begins to settle in and later falls in love with an Italian plumber. When her sister dies, back in Ireland, Eilis returns home and while she is there she must make a decision whether to return to New York or remain in Ireland. Other examples of novels set in this phase of migration are Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* (1979), Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathiser* (2015), and Michael Chabon's

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay (2000).

In the second phase, *'caught in between,'* the child of first-generation migrants must learn to bridge the gap between two cultures. In Alice Pung's *Laurinda* (2014), for example, Vietnamese-Australian teenager Lucy Lam is a scholarship recipient at a prestigious high school. She must navigate the complicated politics of the school, which is manipulated by a powerful group of girls who call themselves The Cabinet, while simultaneously dealing with a home situation in which her mother is employed as cheap labour, for expensive clothing brands, with very poor working conditions. Other examples in this category include Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1997), Melina Marchetta's *Looking for Alibrandi* (1992), Akhil Sharma's *Family Life* (2014) and Christos Tsiolkas' *Barracuda* (2013). Some texts in this category focus on first-generation immigrants who relocated during childhood. Examples include Boris Fishman's *A Replacement Life* (2014) and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007).

In the third phase, *'legacy and civic contribution,'* the second generation – with its stronger identification with the new culture than with their parents' homelands and cultures – deals with the legacy of their parents' migration in terms of racism, conflicted identities and challenges in their attempts to contribute to society. For example, in Ayad Akhtar's play *Disgraced* (2012) Amir Kapoor is on track to become a partner at his New York law firm, but he questions whether a local imam is suffering religious persecution. Amir agrees to appear, unofficially, in court to support the imam and is subsequently passed over for the promotion he had hoped for. Other examples include a number of the short stories in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (2000), Lily Brett's *Too Many Men* (1999) and her *You Gotta Have Balls* (2005), Arnold Zable's *Sea of Many Returns* (2008), Jung Yun's *Shelter* (2016), and the narratives of the second-generation immigrants in Christos Tsiolkas' *The Slap* (2011). Immigrants in the third phase have accrued what Ghassan Hage terms 'practical nationality,' that is they have accumulated 'nationally sanctified and valued social and physical cultural styles and dispositions (national culture) … as well as valued characteristics (national types and national character) within a national field: looks, accent, demeanor, taste, nationally valued social and cultural preferences and behaviour, etc' (53). Hage observes that 'national belonging *tends* to be proportional

to accumulated national capital. That is, there is a tendency for a national subject to be perceived as just as much of a national as the amount of national capital he or she has accumulated' (53; emphasis in original). Texts in this category often focus on the relationship between the protagonists and their first-generation immigrant parents or find their protagonists caught up in complex moral or civic questions or conflicts.

Some texts straddle two or more of these phases. For example, Amy Tan's intricately structured novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) tells a series of mother-daughter stories incorporating both generations' challenges, as well as exploring the effects these differing experiences have on the relationships both within and between the generations of women. Thus the novel has elements of all three phases identified.

This exegesis looks at a novel from each of the identified phases that tells a story about one or more Muslim immigrants. From the first phase, 'finding a new place to call home,' Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup* (2001) shows the complex journey that Abdu, a migrant from an unnamed Muslim country, and white South African Julie must negotiate in order to find a county to call home. The 'push' factor for Abdu is the desire for a larger, more privileged life. For Julie it is the desire to escape the narrow values of her wealthy white parents. Writing about a couple from very different backgrounds allows Gordimer to deal directly with issues of privilege and resentment, secularisation and cultural misunderstandings. In the course of the novel, Julie's initial attraction to the exotic deepens into a more complex understanding of Abdu's homeland, so much so that when Abdu finally does secure the US visas that he has so desperately been working towards, Julie opts to stay behind with his family.

Representing the second phase, 'caught in between,' Bani, the child narrator of Michael Mohammed Ahmad's *The Tribe* (2014), describes three moments in the life of his Lebanese family living in Australia. The text highlights Bani's growing awareness of how the culture he encounters at school and in the media 'others' 'his people' and points to aspects of the family that make him uncomfortable, including its tolerance of violence to women. The use of the child narrator allows this novel to question problematic issues, such as family violence, social stereotyping and racism, in a way

that might have been difficult had another narrative voice been selected. The text also highlights the physical body as a site of tension for the second-generation immigrant. In Bani's case his physical features connect him with his family and his ancestors, but his skin colour – not quite white and not quite black – is a source of anxiety.

Finally, for the third phase, 'legacy and civic contribution,' Amy Waldman's *The Submission* (2011) explores what happens when the winner of the architecture contest for designing the 9/11 monument to be located at Ground Zero is revealed to be a secular, American-born Muslim, Mohammed Khan. Based loosely on the controversy over the Vietnam War Memorial designed by Vietnamese-American Maya Lin, and narrated from six key viewpoints, this novel unpacks the challenges – civic and personal – inherent in this scenario. The novel pays no attention to India, the country from which Khan's parents immigrated, and Khan views himself as an American and the world as open to him, albeit with the inconvenience of the extra airport checks he must endure since the attacks on the World Trade Center.

The three novels I have selected to examine each present a very particular story that forms part of the complex constellation that is migrant fiction. Each of them focuses their attention on a different phase in the process of relocation to, integration into, and contribution to their protagonists' new homelands. They are stories of individuals placed in circumstances in which many situations are outside their control or foreign to their ways of interpreting the world. This is one of the reasons these stories are so fascinating: they show us places we think we know through new eyes and places we don't yet know through eyes – like our own – unaccustomed and searching for meaning in an unfamiliar place.

There are aspects of 'The Price of Two Sparrows' that fit into each of the three phases of immigration fiction I have identified. In phase one, 'finding a new place to call home,' the first-generation immigrant searches for, and relocates to, a new home country: Nadia and, to a lesser extent, Eliza represent this phase. Both have relocated to be with their spouses. The two women differ in the degree to which they are willing to invest in their new country, but both women vacillate between clinging to their old life and building a new life for themselves. Nadia, although she enjoys language

classes, finds the peripheral educational programs offensive and her personal space is often violated. Meanwhile Eliza, more able to avoid speaking Dutch courtesy of her circle of foreign friends and her job at a multinational company, reacts negatively to some of the colonialism she sees reflected in Dutch society. She attempts to ease her homesickness for the United States by returning to practising her Jewish faith. Of the two women, it is ultimately Nadia who is more at home in the Netherlands by the end of the manuscript and Eliza who opts to return to her homeland, apparently permanently, in the closing section of the novel.

In phase two, 'caught in between,' a second-generation child or adolescent must find a way to cope with the differing cultures of home and school as part of the multi-generational process of integration into the family's new home. In 'The Price of Two Sparrows' this takes a slightly different form to most texts in this phase. It is represented by the young Heico, who moves to his mother's home country, the Netherlands, when his parents' marriage fails. Heico struggles with the language and with the unfamiliar social landscape as well as adapting to the densely populated urban space. He is the victim of bullying and things that his peers take for granted unsettle him.

Finally, in phase three, 'legacy and civic contribution,' the adult second-generation migrant must deal with the legacy of their parents' immigration while building an adult life including family formation, social engagement and work. In 'The Price of Two Sparrows' Salema's role as the head architect on the mosque project is questioned because she is seen as the beneficiary of unacknowledged affirmative action. Meanwhile, Youssef has sought a wife from Morocco as he has been unable to find a local wife who fits with his traditional value system, but the interactions between the couple reveal that in many ways he is more Dutch than Moroccan himself.

Second-generation migrants in 'The Price of Two Sparrows' are better able to contend with the bureaucracy of the Dutch system than their first-generation parents. They also dress differently and interact with other Dutch citizens differently: they are more direct, more likely to express their individuality through their clothing choices and they are quicker to question authority figures.

Key threads running through the novels I examine and 'The Price of Two Sparrows' include those of gender, authority and power. In each novel, ideas about authority are challenged, and all the

novels depict strong female figures who hold or claim positions of power or who step up to speak – despite their prior voicelessness – for matters that concern them and their families. Waldman's Asma and Nadia in *The Price of Two Sparrows,* both marginalised and almost invisible in their new homelands, dare to speak up in a public forum in support of something they value. And both Gordimer and Ahmad depict matriarchs who hold positions of quiet but undeniable authority in their homes and in the lives of those around them.

Although the texts I have chosen to look at are all works of contemporary realist fiction, they differ in the extent to which they are based in fact. Ahmad's text might be considered autobiographical fiction (Fogg), Waldman's draws on the controversy surrounding the Washington D.C. Vietnam War Memorial transplanted into post-9/11 New York, while Gordimer's novel is not based on any particular historical or personal events. In this respect, 'The Price of Two Sparrows' most closely resembles Waldman's text as it is based on the planned building of a mosque in Santa Barbara, but the story is transposed to the historical context of the early 2000s in the Netherlands when increasing fears about the 'Islamisation' of the country were further inflamed by two assassinations: that of Pim Fortuyn in July 2002 and of Theo van Gogh in November 2004.

Writing across borders

A key consideration in writing about immigrant communities is the issue of representation. As Emily Johansen observes, literature is intrinsically political (27). In Australia, issues of representation resurface periodically, especially around the question of the representation of Aboriginal characters and communities, although the question is also relevant with respect to immigrant communities and who has the right to represent them.

Our current literary culture is very interested in questions of 'authenticity,' as highlighted, for example, by the recent literary scandals around memoirs that turn out to be part-fictional and authors who are less authentically part of the cultures they represent in their fiction than they claim, as well as the trend towards the 'auto-fiction' of authors such as Rachel Cusk, Shelia Heti, Karl Ove Knåusgaard and Ben Lerner. This interest in an author's or a text's authenticity is closely aligned with the question of the representation of the other. In the case of auto-fiction, for example, we see authors focusing on

the self as subject, a subject about which there is little question of their authority, and without the risk of appropriating stories that, some may argue, are not theirs to tell.

While scholars have for decades raised concerns about who has the right to represent whom, many commentators and authors still believe that it is possible, or even desirable, for authors to attempt to portray the lives of those unlike themselves. Camilla Gibb, for example feels that 'the weight of cultural appropriation put us into these corners where there was nothing left that we could say except to talk about our own navels' (Kamboureli and McGregor 262). The result of this, Gibb feels, inevitably, will be nihilism and the death of art and public expression. Sneja Gunew points to a further difficulty, namely the question of 'who, institutionally speaking, decides the group membership and who interprets and legislates whether authenticity has been achieved? Moreover, in a poststructuralist context of decentred subjectivity, one might argue that no one can fully represent anything' (69).

Salman Rushdie asserts that, 'literature is not in the business of copyrighting certain themes for certain groups' ('Imaginary Homelands' 15). Rather, he believes: 'literature is self-validating … a book is not justified by its author's worthiness to write it, but by the quality of what has been written. There are terrible books that arise directly out of experience, and extraordinary imaginative feats dealing with themes which the author has been obliged to approach from the outside' ('Imaginary Homelands' 14).

Shameem Black has addressed the difficulty that an author faces in imagining others in a way that refuses to reduce them to a reflection of the writer's own prejudices and assumptions. In her work, Black identifies two processes through which she argues it is possible for the author to approach writing the other. The first is the 'crowded self,' in which it is acknowledged that the individual is formed by inter-subjectivity, that one's experiences, beliefs and understandings are shared and socially constructed. She argues that the self and language are 'socially shaped' (35), that 'Modern understandings of selfhood stress its fluidity and provisionality' (35) and that the boundary between the self and other is blurry. For example, in order to write a multiple viewpoint narrative such as Waldman's *The Submission*, the author does not have to have lived the realities of all of her characters.

Waldman has access to many stories, experiences and ways of constructing the world by virtue of being a part of the community and, further, 'learning about others – through history, literature, mass media, or other avenues – constitutes an important part of one's own social identity' (Black 36). Subjectivities, Black claims, 'are forged in the libraries as well as on the streets' (37).

The second construct Black uses is 'crowded style.' Texts that use this 'invite us to meditate on how the process of conceptualizing social difference affects and is affected by the texture, tone, and patterning of their language' (51). Black claims that when the text is formally innovative, this opens up an estrangement from the text for the reader. It is these texts, she believes, that place the largest ethical demand on the reader. Gordimer's *The Pickup*, for example, places ethical demands on its readers because it is told impressionistically: Gordimer switches between first, second and third person narration, and slips in and out of various characters' points of view without warning, her dialogue is minimally indicated and she occasionally directly addresses the reader. What is right and true, and what is wrong and false remains slippery, and Gordimer makes the reader do most of the work assessing the morality of the two main characters' actions, motives and speech.

Berthold Schoene has noted the emergence of a group of novelists whose books might be described as cosmopolitan. Schoene, whose focus is on British Literature, includes authors such as Rachel Cusk, Jon McGregor, David Mitchell and Kiran Desai in this trend, which he suggests has been prompted by globalisation. The cosmopolitan novel allows readers access to the imagined realities of characters who form part of a global community and who often lead lives in very different locations and circumstances to those of the novelist. Ulrick Beck has observed that while cosmopolitanism (which he links to the philosophies of Kant and Habermas) has often been considered 'nice but idealistic' (11), but that now 'cosmopolitanism stands for realism in a world, which has become cosmopolitical in its core' (12), and that cosmopolitan perspectives 'model how to handle, live and describe cultural diversity: *affirmation of the other as different but equal*' (22; emphasis in original). While Dominic Head claims cosmopolitanism requires 'an openness to pluralism, and an accompanying humility, or a willingness to develop in unforeseen directions' (151).

Gordimer's *The Pickup* is an example of the cosmopolitan novel. The text has two geographic centres, and from these Gordimer draws her two, very different, protagonists. Each is trying to escape from (some aspects of) the country, and the socio-economic circumstances, into which they were born. But while they each seek what is 'other' to their own experience, they also embody aspects of their geographic origin: through their values and the strategies they employ to seek what they desire. The world Gordimer depicts is not the colonial centre-and-margins of empire but a globalised world in which human mobility is a privilege that is not equally accessible to all.

The issue of who may represent whom is not the topic of this exegesis. These are complicated issues that require more space to unpack, but because novels are usually complex, multi-charactered, single-author projects, the sincere effort to represent the other is inescapable unless every novel is to be peopled by copies of the author herself. A 2016 article in The Guardian spoke to a number of prominent novelists about this issue and while the nuances of their opinion varied, by and large novelists broadly agreed with Hari Kunzru that 'trespassing into otherness is a foundation of the novelist's work' but enjoined writers to: 'tread with humility. Note that I do not say, "with care". I don't believe any subject matter should *a priori* be off limits to anyone, or that harm necessarily flows from the kind of ventriloquism that all novelists perform. Quite the opposite. Attempting to think one's way into other subjectivities, other experiences, is an act of ethical urgency ... Good writers transgress without transgressing, in part because they are humble about what they do not know. They treat their own experience of the world as provisional. They do not presume. They respect people, not by leaving them alone in the inviolability of their cultural authenticity, but by becoming involved with them. They research. They engage in reciprocal relationships' (Kunzru).

For 'The Price of Two Sparrows' I undertook online, library and in-person research. The manuscript has also been reviewed by a sensitivity reader with expertise regarding the Moroccan and Muslim content to help catch inaccuracies or other problems in representation. A Dutch reader has also reviewed the manuscript, and I have periodically sought advice on American idiomatic expression from an East-Coast-based friend. In the course of writing the novel I attended two international conferences: the first on literature and religion and the second on immigration and

religion. At both, I attended relevant sessions and spoke to experts in the field. I am very grateful to those who gave their time to help with my research or to read the manuscript. Naturally, any errors or inaccuracies remain my own.

I. GENDER, AUTHORITY AND SEEKING A NEW HOME IN NADINE GORDIMER'S *THE PICKUP*

Nadine Gordimer's 2001 novel *The Pickup* represents an example from the first phase of migration fiction I have identified, namely the 'finding a new place to call home' phase. *The Pickup* considers a Muslim country as both a possible starting point for migration as well as a potential endpoint. Further, this text discusses migration both to and from the West, which allows it to articulate a complex, nuanced immigration story. The flipping of contexts in the middle of the book – when the couple move from Julie's home country to Abdu's – gives both of the central characters a chance to be the 'other' and we see the world, at different moments, through each of their viewpoints. In a similar way, 'The Price of Two Sparrows' considers migration as a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon that can operate in multiple directions and which does not produce permanent solutions but which can be more accurately viewed as a state of flux, both system-wide as well as for the individuals involved.

The Pickup is the oldest, by ten years, of the novels I have selected to discuss and it is the only one of the three written by an established author (Ahmad's and Waldman's books are both their authors' debuts). *The Pickup* is Gordimer's thirteenth of fifteen novels in total, and the first of her novels to be published in the twenty-first century. Gordimer was committed to representing the issues of her time and as Dana Mount has observed, the novel 'anticipates the centrality of the Middle East to the twenty-first-century map' (106); this book has a prescience about the rising conflict emerging between the Middle East and the West that came to a dramatic climax in 2001, the year this book was published.

In *The Pickup*, Julie, a white South-African, meets Abdu, an illegal immigrant, in Johannesburg. Abdu is working 'black' as a mechanic, though he is a qualified economist. They begin a romantic relationship vexed by the issue of Abdu's desire for precisely the things Julie wishes to turn her back on: wealth, privilege and social standing. At the midpoint of the book Abdu is forced to leave South Africa and Julie decides to return with him to his family in an unnamed country somewhere in the Middle East. Julie moves in with Abdu's family while Abdu applies for visas for a

number of Western countries. As Abdu's dissatisfaction and impatience grows, Julie falls in love with the desert and begins to integrate into the family and to some extent their religious and cultural practices.

Julie is the daughter of a wealthy, white family adjusting to a post-apartheid South Africa. When we first meet her she has a group of mismatched bohemian friends referred to as 'The Table' and she is attempting to distance herself from her family's privilege without actually forgoing any of its comforts. She is playing house in an old servant's cottage in Johannesburg and her finances are taken care of by the family accountant. Still in her twenties, she already has a substantial amount of family money in her name. As Andrea Spain observes, 'Julie and her friends aspire to live lives worthy of the New South Africa, even as those very aspirations are caught in the cynical realities of global capital, power relations, and racialized divisions' (756). Julie is defined by her privilege and the way she feels about it: she is white, wealthy, geographically mobile and has a sense of free-floating guilt about her own privilege. In contrast, Abdu seems to be defined by his need to acquire for himself those things Julie wishes to shrug off.

Abdu, whose real name is Ibrahim, has already been deported from the UK but he is determined to build a home and a future for himself in the West. He sees Julie as spoilt and naïve, always on the lookout for the next adventure without having to face the realities he faces due to his tenuous status in her country. Whereas Julie is trying to distance herself from her father and his wealth, 'Abdu approaches those in The Suburbs with admiration and keen observation; he strives to become that other kind of person: an agent with choice' (Spain, 762) and the reader frequently questions whether his attachment to Julie is based entirely on calculated self-interest.

When Julie decides to give up her flat and her job and join Abdu in his return, Abdu is scathing of her foolishness in renouncing the comforts of home and of her quest for 'adventure.' In Abdu's eyes Julie has already failed him. He later reflects: 'he had not wanted her to come here, she would not let go of him and he could hardly have told her that her purpose in his life was ended' (174) when she failed to be useful in allowing him to remain in South Africa.

While a number of critics, including Ruth Lahti, feel that Abdu and Julie's relationship is

'unlikely' (41), Gordimer suggests that each sees in the other the reversal that they are seeking. Julie and Abdu each long to escape into their partner's reality and – as each of them draw closer to this goal – the relationship becomes increasingly troubled until it becomes clear that they cannot both have what they want and still remain together. Their mutual attraction to the 'otherness' in their partner can only end in disappointment.

The inequitable access to global mobility is a key concern of the novel. *The Pickup* (much like *The Price of Two Sparrows*) is full of immigrants, would-be-migrants, and 'immigrants by descent' (48). Emma Hunt argues that in *The Pickup*: 'Gordimer critiques the flows that define the current era of globalization, and draws attention to the way in which class – often concomitant with race, ethnicity, and citizenship – has a bearing on our relative mobility and access to resources' (105). Post-apartheid South Africa is unsettled and while the privileged leave for Australia and the United States, new migrant groups are entering to make the most of the opportunities there.

While the characters are both less polarised and less self-conscious about it, the issues of privilege and mobility are also important in *The Price of Two Sparrows.* For example, white American Eliza thinks nothing of returning to the US for the holidays while Moroccan Nadia must wait many years to see her family again. And while Heico casually entertains whether he and Eliza should relocate to the US, without any real concern as to whether he might be able to acquire a visa or get work once there, the homesick Nadia is aware of how lucky she is that her family have sent her to the Netherlands and does not plan to disappoint them by returning home.

The cosmopolitan immigration novel|

For Schoene, the cosmopolitan novel allows us 'to imagine humanity in global existence as determined by, yet not wholly incarcerated in, ideological frames and to conceive of real cosmopolitics as a communal tackling of global threats beyond the requirement for perfect, enduring unanimity' (186). Elizabeth Jackson draws a distinction between post-colonial and cosmopolitan literature, where the latter resists the old binary of 'centre' and 'margin' (112). Gordimer's text falls into this cosmopolitan category, where the mobility desired and pursued by the two central characters

proceed in opposing directions with Julie trying to escape wealth and privilege and Abdu seeking it. Jackson argues that cosmopolitan texts – she uses the example of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* – deconstruct the 'simplistic binaries of power, geographical origin, geographical location, and cultural identity' (112). Gordimer's novel is exemplary of this trend. In *The Pickup* all countries are both potential origins and potential destinations for travel, migration and work.

The central geographic move made in the course of the novel is Abdu's deportation from South Africa and return to his family and homeland. In post-colonial terms this centre-to-margins immigration is tentative and initially temporary for both characters but once Julie embraces her new home, this place – centred on Abdu's family and the desert landscape they live in – becomes the novel's true 'centre' and *The Pickup* does not follow Abdu as he departs in search of his own future outside it.

Gunning observes that '[c]osmopolitanism in the novel, then, perhaps also finds best expression in the irruption of otherness into the settled consciousness of characters, narrators, and readers, challenging partiality with the proximity of a difference that refuses to stay abstract' (802). Gordimer's characters grapple, throughout the whole text, with their understandings of those who are 'other' to them and who apprehend the world differently. Gordimer pays particular attention to Julie's journey in this respect. Spain has noted that with *The Pickup* Gordimer has ventured into difficult territory: 'Stripped of her densely woven, difficult, and profoundly self-aware prose style, the novel could easily be recast as the worst and most dangerous kind of Orientalism, a privileged Western woman finding enlightenment in a cinematic desert' (764). To counter this Spain points to the scene in which Gordimer explicitly addresses this danger showing Julie rejecting the literary models of the Westerner in Arabia in the books she has ordered, *Hester Stanhope*, *Lawrence of Arabia* (764), as 'English charades in the desert, imperialism in fancy dress' (Gordimer 198). Spain references Julie's refusal to appropriate local dress other than when it is a necessary adaptation to the weather conditions in the area. Julie rejects the models these books present as romantic dreams, useless to her in her own journey towards finding and making a home with Abdu.

Although Gordimer sidesteps an overtly colonial viewpoint for Julie, she does not let her

entirely off the hook. A line of Rilke's poetry that Julie returns to in the final pages of the novel is a telling reflection on the misunderstandings between the couple: 'I was occupied in picturing him to myself; I had undertaken the task of imagining him' (245). So, perhaps after all Abdu was to her only ever the 'Oriental Prince' that The Table of friends called him behind their backs in Johannesburg.

Ileana Dimitriu points to *The Pickup* as a text in which dichotomies such home/exile are unhelpful and proposes the idea of 'transnation' as more productive. Both Julie and Abdu constantly wrestle with the idea of 'home.' In his quest to move to the more privileged West, Abdu's homeland has already ceased to be home for him, although Julie is initially unable to see this. But Abdu, on arriving in his homeland, literally refuses to unpack his bag. He turns down a lucrative partnership with his wealthy uncle and generally refuses to invest, or to allow Julie to invest, in their life there. Abdu does everything he can to try to stop Julie from integrating into the ways of his homeland and family, perhaps sensing that the more Julie integrates, and builds connections with his family members, the less she will want to leave. Gordimer seems to imply that one's true destination (or perhaps 'home') is not the country with the most opportunity, but the one that allows for true connections to be established. From this perspective Abdu might be seen to be foolishly throwing away the family connections he has in his homeland, just as he feels Julie has foolishly abandoned hers.

In her discussion of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake,* Francoise Kral suggests that: 'Trapped between two worlds, with one foot on each continent, migrants develop a double identity and somehow gain access, through loss and sometimes trauma, to two different systems and to two radically opposed world pictures' (73). Gordimer takes this one step further in *The Pickup* and has her two protagonists, Julie and Abdu, embody two radically opposed worldviews and then places each of them in the other's world (Abdu in the first half of the book, Julie in the second).

A large part of the interest in the novel lies in the misunderstanding between the couple. Julie and Abdu are unable to understand each other's priorities. Each is perplexed by the limits of what the other will ask of, or agree to, with respect to their families. Gordimer presents this as partially a result of their different backgrounds, partially due to their opportunism (Abdu is interested in Julie for her

connections, Julie is interested in Abdu because he represents what she thinks of as an authenticity that she can't find in her family and friends, and as a means to distance herself from her privileged family) and partially due to ordinary marital misunderstanding.

An example of their differing perspectives and priorities occurs when one night, after they have been in Abdu's homeland for some time, Julie dreams of green. Abdu interprets this as a demand on him: his wife wants green, so he should take her out of the desert to a new life in a new place. But Julie herself later interprets the dream as connected to a plan Abdu's family has, but cannot afford to realise, about sinking a well in an oasis and cultivating rice crops. 'I dreamt it because it exists' (213) Julie concludes when her sister- and father-in-law take her on a trip to the oasis and Julie begins to wonder if she can access a pre-inheritance to fund the scheme. When she suggests this to Abdu, however, he dismisses it as another of her self-indulgent adventures: 'Julie, we do not live here' (216). For Julie the dream represents the possibility of remaining, while for Abdu it means the opposite. So while Abdu is searching for 'possibilities' (213) in the West, Julie feels she has uncovered one that will allow them to remain where they are.

Meanwhile Abdu continues to search for a way out. And then, after so much rejection, Abdu is suddenly successful in securing visas for himself and Julie to move to the United States. Julie worries that the solution that Abdu has found for them is going to cost Abdu too much. In her sadness about this she feels a kinship with his mother, who is losing Abdu's physical presence in her life once again. Or maybe, Julie has already made her own decision and she, too, is coming to terms with losing Abdu.

Ultimately, Julie and Abdu find that they cannot support each other's illusions: Abdu refuses to endorse Julie's dream of profitable rice crops: stripping back the illusion to reveal that the whole operation is a front for illegal activity. Julie, in her turn, is painfully aware of just how low America will bring Abdu, '[l]iving in a dirty hovel … cleaning American shit' (230), before he will be able to begin building the life he dreams of, and she refuses to go along with this choice. Julie – resisting the expectations of Abdu, his family and her own family – makes her own decision to stay with Abdu's family.

In some ways, Gordimer's novel anticipates the novel I set out to write. It deals with the socio-political conundrum of global immigration by refracting it through the eyes of immigrants with a number of different motives and concerns. All the main characters of *The Price of Two Sparrows* are migrants of one sort or another (as are the most important bird species central to the main conflict of the novel). Heico has migrated from Australia as a child, returning to his mother's home country after his parents' separation. His wife, Eliza, might be considered an expatriate, a US citizen who is in no particular hurry to naturalise. She, like Julie, has relocated for love, but Eliza maintains much stronger connections to her family and home country, which proves problematic when Heico and Eliza's relationship is strained by work pressures and marital conflict. Salema is a second-generation Turkish immigrant and Youssef is a second-generation Moroccan immigrant, while Nadia is a more recent Moroccan immigrant brought out as a bride for Youssef who sometimes struggles to understand his new wife. Various life decisions (economic, romantic) and family configurations (marriage, divorce) have led to this group of people finding themselves in the Netherlands and in various relationships to mainstream Dutch society. Conflicts that stem from the resultant cultural misunderstandings occur at every level: household, local council, national. There are also echoes of international and historical conflicts present in *The Price of Two Sparrows* as there are in *The Pickup,* in the former these stem from 9/11 and the Second World War while the latter grapples with the legacy of apartheid.

Gender, authority and power

Although, as Hilary Dannenberg notes, Gordimer has resisted the label of feminist writer (69), *The Pickup* has a lot to say about gender. Julie's father warns her that in Abdu's homeland, 'women are treated like slaves. It's the culture, religion' (Gordimer 98). To some extent Abdu seems to agree with him. Abdu stops Julie from joining his sisters in the domestic work around the house: 'She picked up the jeans and shirt, and the simple gesture, could have been that of his mother or sisters, sent him over to her, and he smothered her head against his breast as if to stay something beginning in her' (141). He wants Julie to remain a woman of the West because that will allow them to maintain the appropriate relationship dynamic for the life he wants for himself: Western, privileged, and far from

his homeland.

But the dichotomy is not as clear as Julie's father indicates. As Hunt observes, other than Julie, we do not meet any strong, empowered women in the South Africa section of the book (111). The South African women we meet are wives, socialites and secretaries, dependent on men for their social status. After they move, Abdu carefully guards against Julie's taking on a subservient domestic role in the household and ultimately, in the eyes of his brothers and father at least, Abdu must deal with the consequences of precisely the contradiction he has himself courted. His wife refuses to obey and follow him to America, but it is he who has resisted having her change her independent, Western ways. We see Abdu repulsed by the power he has over his sister even as he exerts it in his anger at Julie's refusal to leave his homeland: 'He has a power over [his sister] he will never have over his wife Julie, and that he would never want to have, it is part of what he emigrates from, every time he gets away. While he exerts it, it sickens him, the anger his sister fearfully sees rising in him' (257).

There is, however, another model of womanhood in the book that is neither cowering 'slave' nor headstrong Westerner. The quiet authority of Abdu's mother is the central influence in the family home and Abdu's love and respect for his mother makes this arguably his primary relationship. Though Abdu's mother's life is centred on prayer and we very rarely hear her speak, it is she who is consulted on family matters and who negotiates on behalf of the family with her wealthy brother. Abdu observes that '[t]here is no cyclone of emotion of which she does not occupy the still eye of his respect. Nothing, ever, can take precedence over that' (257). Though his father silently reproaches Abdu for his failure to control Julie, Abdu knows that his father always does what Abdu's mother knows is right (256).

In *The Pickup* Gordimer presents us with an impressionistic, almost collage-like text, which is driven, it would appear, more by the sounds of the words than by any particular narrative pattern or predetermined structure. What is true, and who is right in any given situation, remains unclear and at the end the future is uncertain. Bill Ashcroft, referencing Homi Bhabha, has observed that 'in the transcultural performance of postcolonial writing, [there] is a Third Space of enunciation between the poles of cultural identity, a space within which cultural identities themselves are transformed' (120).

Julie's transformation by the end of the novel exemplifies this. In the final pages of *The Pickup* we see Julie begin to take the painful steps necessary to transform herself into this third type of woman: a woman with the quiet, unquestioned authority of her mother-in-law.

Abdu's brothers – alarmed at the message Julie's resistance to Abdu will send to the family and to friends and neighbours – invent lies to cover the truth, but his mother, clear-eyed and silent, sides with Julie. And on the final page we see Khadija – until now the reviled and apparently abandoned wife of Abdu's brother – in a new light. She too is perhaps patiently waiting out the necessary time and, when her husband returns to her she will take her rightful place as the unquestioned authority at the centre of her own home and family.

The new possibilities that immigration and return present have created a new constellation of family dynamics: by the end of the novel the family home houses two wives of absent sons. But the way this new challenge will be dealt with is unchanged: patience, prayer, wisdom, loyalty and the honouring of what is right. Abdu sees Julie's decision to remain in his family home rather than immigrate to America as 'sheltered middle-class Western romanticism' (262) but Gordimer invites the reader to see this differently. While Julie's journey from South Africa to Abdu's homeland might perhaps be described this way, her refusal to leave can be read as a courageous decision that the book seems to endorse.

The interactions between immigration and gender that feature in Gordimer's novel are also addressed in *The Price of Two Sparrows*. While Heico and the 'community' voice are both masculine, there are a number of strong female voices in the novel: Eliza, Heico's American wife; Salema, the mosque architect, an educated second-generation Turkish immigrant; and Nadia, a recent Moroccan immigrant actively working to build her new life in Holland.

Nadia's story moves from the domestic sphere to the civic in the course of the book. Her isolation abates as the plot progresses and she finds opportunities to integrate herself into her surroundings and identifies ways in which those around her subvert their reality in order to make sense of their world and their circumstances. Salema's story, on the other hand, is a professional one. She resists Heico's interest in her private life and refuses to engage with his inability to deal with her

position as female, Muslim and a powerful actor in the conflict about the mosque. Eliza provides a point of resistance to some of the cultural assumptions that Heico has assimilated since moving to Holland as a young teenager. She herself has recently returned to the Judaism of her childhood, and as her discontentment in her marriage intensifies she finds she is unwilling to tolerate some of the hypocrisies she sees around her.

Place

Hunt argues that Johannesburg, like all global cities, presents a problem of identity in this novel in that there is no place in which to ground the self. Instead, Gordimer's protagonists locate themselves through the 'alternative spaces in opposition to the city, and the strategies by which her protagonists locate the self are examined through these spaces – sexual, familial, spiritual, and regional' (105). Hunt observes that the 'the quest for belonging finally demands a return to the concept of place, but not necessarily to the space defined by the nation's borders' (105) and that '[b]elonging to the spaces that Gordimer creates does not require citizenship, but responsiveness to the specificities of place' (120). This is a process with which both Julie and Abdu demonstrate they are willing to engage in terms of their relationships to work, clothing and relationships in each other's countries.

Hunt has observed that in *The Pickup* '[t]he global city that replaces the apartheid city is also a divided space with huge disparities in wealth and occupation,' and the inequitable Johannesburg acts as a metonym for the complex global world in which the whole of the novel plays out (104-105). Through her novel, Hunt claims, Gordimer 'interrogates the power relations in the new conflation of spaces, and argues that we need to recover a sense of specific place' (105).

Similarly, the relationship of individuals to place is a principal concern in *The Price of Two Sparrows*, as is the debate around the use and control of space in a globalised world, which is also central to Amy Waldman's 2011 novel *The Submission* discussed in Chapter 3. In 'The Price of Two Sparrows' a Muslim group, consisting mostly of first- and second-generation immigrants, tries to win support for a proposed mosque by working with local bureaucrats, while attempting to minimise the effects of increasing concerns about security and national identity.

The relationship Julie has with the desert in *The Pickup,* is in some ways reflected in 'The

Price of Two Sparrows' in Salema's desire to build on the edge of the North Sea sand dunes because these evoke for her a romantic notion of the Sahara, which she has only ever seen on a holiday. Salema's design for the mosque echoes the dunes in form, and, although she rightly observes that it is a principle of Islamic architecture to echo and embrace the surrounding environment, there is nothing to suggest the building should evoke the desert when there is no desert in the area. Perhaps, in this, Salema's impulse echoes and inverts Julie's momentary desire to 'green' the desert by cultivating rice. Here Salema wants to 'desert' the lowlands for the sake of a picturesque location for her design – though of course she does not specifically wish to change the landscape but only to build in the particular location and by implication to accept whatever the environmental consequences of this might be.

Julie's and Salema's impulses to evoke another location in the country that is now their home places each of them in a complex relationship with their present home countries. Both places are globalised and yet they are still strongly controlled by local mores, values and the very limitations of the land itself: the desert's lack of agricultural fertility and the limited capacity of the North Sea sand dunes to support its diverse bird, plant and animal life when also under pressure to accommodate human needs and developments.

Julie's decision and her coming into her authoritative womanhood is firmly rooted in place. Californian casino money and undignified scrabbling at the bottom of the food chain are both rejected. Julie's own homeland of South Africa is also rejected. She has found her home and in time, Gordimer suggests, Abdu may return to her. Not necessarily because of love, which he sees as a luxury he cannot afford, but because it is right and because that is where they belong.

Mount reads this differently. For her Julie's decision to remain is tied up with her plan to cultivate rice. Mount rightly points out that it seems we are supposed to read this plan as misguided and naïve (102). Mount is troubled by Julie's apparent longing for the pastoral and the colonial politics implied by this when combined with her decision to remain behind in Abdu's homeland (107). However, the rice-oasis episode can also be read as Julie's final slip into reliance on her family's privilege before leaving this behind as she fully embraces her life in the desert. Certainly the rice plan

plays no role in Abdu's and Julie's final disagreement about her refusal to travel with him to America which seems unusual if her reasons for staying rest on this plan. As the book closes, Julie abandons her misguided plan to change the place she finds herself in. She commits to changing herself in order to remain, as she believes is right, in Abdu's homeland and build a home for herself there.

There is perhaps also an inversion of Nora's journey in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in that it is not through Julie's leaving the 'doll's house' in Johannesburg that she gains her power and authority – although this, too is necessary – but rather through her eventual refusal to leave Abdu's family home at Abdu's bidding when she knows this to be the wrong decision.

Although Mount argues that 'while Julie's devotion to place is a satisfactory personal solution it is not politically satisfying' (105), Julie's final decision can be read as *both* personally and politically satisfying. Personally, due to her links to the place and to selected people, and politically due to her commitment to her new home in both the familial and in a broader sense to the country in which she finds herself, all of which stems from something more than landscape alone.

When we first meet Gordimer's Julie, seen trapped in a broken-down car in the middle of a busy highway, she appears to be a victim of a ravenous city (Mount 108) but, as the novel closes her gesture of despair and helplessness is echoed and inverted and is now one with which she chooses to take control of her life and her situation.

The Pickup is a text in which the colonial ideas of centre and margin, North and South and East and West are less relevant to the direction of migration than the values of each individual. Julie and Abdu both want full lives for themselves, and indeed for each other, but differ in how they envision that life. Although 'The Price of Two Sparrows' has only one geographic location, there is also a conflict of values and visions, and the immigration narratives precede in a number of directions in the course of the novel and prior to it, as each character tries to build a life with their own values at the centre. Further, in the course of both texts women take ownership of their own migration stories whether this is by staying in their adopted country (Julie) or in choosing, ultimately, to leave it (Eliza), or by trying to build a better life for themselves in their (new) homeland as Julie, Salema and Nadia all put themselves on the line to do.

II. COLLAPSING 'THEM AND US': THE SECOND-GENERATION MIGRANT IN MICHAEL MOHAMMED AHMAD'S *THE TRIBE*

Michael Mohammed Ahmad's *The Tribe* deals with the experiences of, and challenges faced by, the second-generation Islamic migrant in Australia and typifies the second-phase migrant fiction I have identified: the story of the second-generation child caught between two cultures. Gunew has observed that often the immigrant community 'spends the first generation struggling to survive so that cultural production is kept to a minimum' (119). As a result fiction, written by members of the immigrant community, more commonly comes from the second generation. In *The Tribe*, child-narrator Bani tells the story of his Lebanese Muslim family in three interconnected stories: one, from when he is seven, about his multi-generational family home; the next a family wedding from when he is nine; and the third the death of his grandmother from when he is eleven years old.

The Tribe is an Australian story focusing on a Lebanese-Australian child growing up between two cultures or, more accurately, in the midst of an array of cultural and religious influences including those that come from his extended family, his school and the pop culture that permeates his world. Ahmad makes use of a child narrator to allow him to portray the cultural divide with a naivety that brings clear-sightedness to the issues raised in the text and allows readers into a world that might otherwise be inaccessible to them.

The Tribe can be located in a tradition of Australian literature that deals with the migrant experience and includes Nino Culota's *They're a Weird Mob* (1957), Melinda Marchetta's *Looking for Alibrandi,* (1992), Christos Tsiolkas' *The Slap* (2008), Alice Pung's *Laurinda* (2014) and A. S. Patrić's *Black Rock White City* (2015). Indeed Ahmad read *Looking for Alibrandi* at school: 'I went to one of the worst and most violent schools in Sydney. It was predominantly Arabic boys. It was incredible to see young men from impoverished, illiterate backgrounds engage with *Looking for Alibrandi*' (Freymark 85).

Ahmad's text echoes what Françoise Kral refers to as 'the grand clichés of migration literature such as the characters' sense of in-betweenness and unbelonging, their desire to fit in and

the way they make up for the absence of the Motherland by reinventing a fantasized homeland, flawless and pristine' (65). Like *Looking for Alibrandi*, *The Tribe* is a coming-of-age story about a young person caught between the cultures and traditions of their (extended) family and the Australian culture that surrounds them. Like Josie in *Looking for Alibrandi*, Bani, a young Lebanese-Australian child living in the Western suburbs of Sydney, must negotiate two worlds: school and home. He is deeply imbedded in The Tribe of the title but also has an eye on what his non-Muslim peers think about him and his family. In one episode the family prepares for a wedding, dressing in gaudy formal wear. Bani is initially happily caught up in the excitement of the family event. It is only once they step outside the family home that the young narrator suddenly sees the family from an outsider's perspective (65). Ahmad, himself, has spoken in an interview about his own strategic embracing of two names while growing up Michael and Mohammed:

> Being two different people with two different names is … about living strategically in two communities. So part of the advantage of having the names Michael and Mohammed is not just about feeling repressed … I'm being strategic about when I can be Michael and when I can be Mohammed. (Fogg np)

This adoption of anglicised names has been a relatively common practice for immigrants to Australia for many decades. Ahmad used 'Michael' during primary school and 'Mohammed' at his predominantly Arab-Australian high school in each case highlighting one part of his identity while suppressing the other (Fogg).

Bani's world is linked to the world of his non-migrant schoolmates by the presence of branded toys, such as *Power Rangers*, and children's television, including *Sesame Street*, even as he is aware of the differences between himself and the other kids at school. There are nine migrant children at Bani's school, of whom six are from his family. The children from The Tribe adopt anglicised names and their lunchboxes are a point of interest for their peers. As is characteristic of many second-generation-migrant novels 'the monoculturally white characters … are represented as somewhat lacking in cosmopolitan sophistication' (Campbell-Hall 292) so that when Bani's classmates ask him if he is eating spring rolls Bani is phlegmatic: 'I always say yes because there's no

difference to them' (Ahmad 23), although his rolled-up Lebanese bread often contains nothing more exotic than Nutella.

Depicting a family and a community

Ahmad's text, like Gordimer's *The Pickup,* labels important subgroups with capitalised definite articles, for example: The Tribe (in Ahmad's text) and The Table (in Gordimer's). This similarity points to an interesting convergence of concerns between the two books in groups that operate with their own rules, rhythms and mores in the midst of a mainstream culture that holds other values and behaves in different ways. In Gordimer's text The Suburbs are placed in opposition to the values and concerns of The Table even though both arenas fail Julie when she is faced with the deportation of her partner. In Ahmad's text The Tribe is set up as a group that excludes everyone outside the family and although there are certainly many imperfections within the family, it is clear that the world outside The Tribe is often brutish, ignorant and cruel.

A particular strength of Ahmad's text is the way he writes about a complex community without collapsing the community's members into faceless numbers. Neave (305) points to the repetitions of gestures and sketched character traits Ahmad uses to keep track of the large number of characters. Ahmad's text builds up a picture of a Muslim family which challenges and complicates stereotypes of Muslim Australians by deftly humanising and particularising the family's many members, as well as by opening up a space for the author to look at some of the more difficult issues within the community from a child's perspective.

In this way *The Tribe* is able to give a sense of the diversity and complexity of the migrant experience. The text clearly demonstrates that Muslim Australians from the same family can have very different migrant experiences. Bani gives the example of different attitudes to forbidden foods (73) and language use, and demonstrates the wide spectrum of religious observance amongst the adults in his family. He also points to differences in how recent migrants differ from second-generation migrants showing the reader that second generation members of The Tribe have adopted some Western behaviours, even if they have not entirely embraced the corresponding values and attitudes (61).

As with *The Pickup*, the authority of the matriarch within the family is clear. The Tribe's dominant figure is Tayta, Bani's grandmother, the head of the family and of the over-filled 'House of Adam' which, in the first section of the book, houses almost all of her surviving children, their partners and their offspring. Tayta is able to protect her grandchildren from their parents' disciplinary measures, and it is she who is able to reverse the bride's decree that there be no children on the wedding video (54). The text clearly illustrates that the videographer recognises the family configuration and understands the need to capitulate to Tayta's authority.

Neave claims that *The Tribe* 'challenges mainstream media portrayals of Lebanese-Muslim immigrants in the western suburbs of Sydney' (300-301). Indeed, the back-cover text explicitly places *The Tribe* in opposition to representations of Arab-Australian Muslims in the media. Ahmad's text seems, in part, to be attempting to break down the 'them' and 'us' paradigm that it portrays. Bani's narration makes the text accessible to readers outside The Tribe: he explains words, traditions, food customs, family expectations and translates prayers (127). In this way the novel has what Ken Arvidson, when writing about contemporary Maori writing, calls a 'purposive nature' in that it serves both an educative and a political function (117). Ahmad's text makes the point that we are not as different as the reader might think. Bani observes, for example that 'The Tribe are very similar to Christians. Drinking alcohol is supposed to be forbidden but we do it anyway. Our women are meant to cover up too but we don't do that either' (16), leaving open to the reader's interpretation whether he means that The Tribe are similar in that they drink and don't cover up, or that Christians, too, disregard many of their religion's restrictions, or both.

But *The Tribe* does not sweep the cultural differences that do exist under the carpet. Through Bani, Ahmad allows the reader to see that, though some members of the family drink, the culture of drinking Bani is exposed to does nothing to demystify the architectural features of their Sydney home and it is not until Bani is older that he realises that the bar in the living room, that the family use to store olives, pickles and *shanglish,* is 'supposed to be for alcohol just like the real bar at the pub that's down the street' (8).

The exclusiveness of the family relationship is made explicit in the second section of *The*

Tribe in which the (presumably Christian Lebanese) shopkeepers are identified as outsiders at a family wedding: 'There is something about The Tribe that keeps *us* in, and keeps *them* out' (91). The nature of this 'something' is in part elucidated earlier in this story when we are introduced to the rituals for welcoming a new member to The Tribe during the courtship process preceding the wedding of Bani's Uncle Ali. This process is non-negotiable, involves the whole family and is explicitly identified as the way the family chooses to operate despite Australian mores. The point is underlined by Bani's father: this courtship process – the family visits, gifts, food and rituals to allow the young couple to get to know each other – is one way in which The Tribe are refusing to capitulate to the surrounding culture (44). It is also a chance to educate Bani about the process he himself will one day be at the centre of, so that while Bani's father takes the opportunity to warn him that he should not go empty-handed to visit his in-laws, Ali's fiancée's brother draws Bani and his brother into complicity in a sexual joke levelled against their sisters and cousins thus beginning a process of socialising the young Bani into the expectation of having sexual and physical dominance over women (42).

Ahmad's text also questions the 'othering' of Bani's people in pop culture and in the wider world (68, 139). 'Are these … *my* people?' (68; emphasis in the original) Bani asks himself at one point 'They look like the bad guys from *Indiana Jones*' (68). At the same time the child's insider viewpoint allows a space for Bani to comment on topics that outsiders may shy away from such as the treatment of women by their husbands, the racism Bani faces in school and Bani's reflections on what basis in reality the stereotypes he encounters might have (71).

The Tribe is swimming in pop-culture references, such as *Beverly Hills 90210* and the *Power Rangers*. These serve to anchor the story in time and help to normalise Bani's childhood, which for many of Ahmad's readers may initially seem foreign to their own experience of growing up in the Australian suburbs. The pop-culture references also give us a hold on the more peripheral characters. For example the cloth poster of Elvis – that Bani tells us looks like his Uncle Ali – helps the reader to visualise his uncle. Later, Bani's references to *Indiana Jones* and Jafar in *Aladdin* show us the family encountering representations of Arabs in popular culture.

The Tribe also references Islamic culture, and the Qur'an in particular, for metaphors. The

sleeping Tayta is described as 'like Bilqis, the Queen of Sheba, posing for a sculpture, her body rising as she takes deep breaths in and falling as she lets deep breaths out' (9) and Bani's father points his finger 'up toward the second level of the house like it was the staff of Moses' (21). Ahmad also uses classical references: for example Bani can imagine Uncle Ehud 'standing bare-chested atop a mountain throwing thunderbolts' (12). The family home's furnishings are a similar miscellany of East-meets-West with tapestries including one of Elvis, one of 'Bedouins on camels in the desert' (10), and one of two bulls colliding (echoing the disposition of the volatile Uncle Osama in whose living room this is the only decoration).

Beyond its use as a way of understanding and contextualising the world, religion provides comfort in times of crisis for The Tribe. Bani's father places the Qur'an under Bani's pillow when he is afraid at night, reads him a prayer when Bani and his siblings are alone, and the family are united in prayer when Tayta dies. Further, the tenets of Islam – from the overarching to the more minor – determine behaviour in the family home. Bani's father tells him that the most sinful way to make fun of someone is to make fun of their nose. Bani, aware that he can sin in his thoughts, tries not to look at his aunt's dolphin-like nose. However, as Neave has noted, the observance of the tenets of Islam among the members of *The Tribe* remains 'fitful' throughout the text (301). This echoes Abdu's attitude to his religion in Gordimer's novel. Religion no longer seems central to Abdu's life but he engages in religious practices and cultural observances to avoid giving offence to his family and community, and although Julie is respectful of the family's religious practices and traditions – and indeed joins the family in fasting during Ramadan – there is '[no] hint of a burgeoning spirituality, no sense of a conversion' (Spain 767).

Growing up in the present tense

The Tribe covers three non-continuous time periods in Bani's childhood, each narrated in the present tense. Neave (305) points to the phrase which bookends each section and explicitly justifies the present tense narration: 'I was only seven [or nine or eleven] when this happened, but it always feels like right now' (Ahmad 3, 35, 39, 110, 113, 156). Each day in the House of Adam 'is a day in [Bani's] blood – it stays with [him] forever' (22), so that each story plays out in the present tense. This

technique is also a means of conveying to the reader a past without the benefit of hindsight, leaving Bani's naivety intact in each time period.

Gunew claims that minority writers tend to have 'an unproblematically coherent subjectivity projected apon them … [and] their ability to produce "textuality" or to play textual games is rarely countenanced' (73). They are often valued merely as eye-witnesses and confined to realist genres. Ahmad's text, however, is highly literary and much more complex than a text that might be read more for sociological interest that for its literary merit. R. Mac Jones has noted the literary trend (which he relates to the visual art's trend towards Cubism) to portray what was 'sequential in experience' (182) as simultaneous in art. Novel writing, he notes, 'has become a game of sequence now played on the field of the simultaneous' (Jones 182). The clearest example of this, in Ahmad's text, is a deftly handled flash-forward. In the closing pages Bani consults his sister about her whereabouts during the final episode in the book – the removal of Tayta's body from the family home. The siblings' discussion about this takes place in the children's future adulthood which Bani expresses as '[f]ifteen years from now' (156) so that all time (from the earliest reported episode, to this one which occurs in the future) is rendered as simultaneous on the page.

Bhabha tells us that 'thinking and writing are acts of translation' ('Cave of Making' ix) and this may be especially true in the case of immigrant fiction. However, Alistair Cormack questions whether realism is the right tool for novels that deal with the immigrant experience: '[r]ealism may be capable of representing an ethnically diverse [population], but it can do so only by an act of untroubled translation, the effect of which is to diminish the jarring differences between cultures' (qtd. in Gunning 718). The potential result is an inability of the text to represent accurately the complex nature of modern, pluralistic societies. Indeed, realism, with its necessary simplifications, compression and elisions, can only partially represent any lived experience.

Schoene notes that the cosmopolitan novel is 'world-creative' in that 'its narrative forms and representational techniques …[are] crucially and constructively informative of its vision of the world' (178). That is, novels of this type often create the innovations they need to succeed in their ambitions, so that their cosmopolitanism lies as much in how they achieve their ends as in their content. Salman

Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988), is an example of a work of immigrant fiction that uses magic realism and dream sequences in his representation of a complex world in which cultures, values and religions meet. But stepping away from realism is not the only solution. There are a number of tools at the realist's disposal that *do* allow her to critique and question the self as well as group and societal norms. As Lorin Stein puts it in a recent article in *The Atlantic*: 'fiction provides the authority to speak about deep things; at the same time, it provides a shield, a mask. The mask lets you say things, talk about things that you couldn't ordinarily talk about' (Fassler n.p.). Thus fiction, even realist fiction such at *The Tribe*, provides the author with tools to make more radical social critiques than they might otherwise feel able to make.

Ahmad achieves this, at least in part, by using a naïve narrator. This technique is a common one – both in migrant fiction and more generally – and can be devastating as the adult reader is able to fill in the gaps left by the child's innocent narration. Examples include M. J. Hyland's *Carry Me Down* (2006), which deals with a profoundly unhappy Irish childhood, and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (1988) (originally published as *Ice Candy Man)* which describes violence during the partitioning of the Indian subcontinent, in both cases as seen through the eyes of a child narrator. In her discussion of Meera Syal's fiction Devon Campbell-Hall observes that the 'dual-cultural positioning of second-generation migrant children renders them useful literary devices for deconstructing various aspects of [a] multi-cultural/multi-racial … society' (290). This is in part, she claims, because 'children are naturally more motivated by immediate experiences than by logic or previous knowledge' (290) and thus a child narrator is a useful device for articulating social critiques and exposing moral inconsistencies (291-92).

Like Syal's narrators in *Anita and Me* (1996) and *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* (1999), Bani fluctuates 'between childhood innocence and adult knowledge' (Campbell-Hall 291). Bani is placed between two cultures at an age when he is unable to comprehend the adult world fully. 'One of the benefits of inhabiting this fictional hybrid space,' Campbell-Hall claims, 'is the ability to comprehend more than one perspective. This ability to see beyond the immediately visible makes fictional migrant children useful not merely as the symbolic voice of the future, but also as the present voice of conflict

between represented cultures' (292). Bani begins the narrative as a relative innocent: for example, when visiting Melbourne with his mother he believes it is Lebanon because he has so much family there. At the same time, even as the narrative opens, Bani is aware that he is not safe from the physical violence dealt out by his Uncle Osama. But by the time we reach the final story Bani has acquired a more complex worldview. Tayta's death, in the final section of the book, marks the end of a particular configuration of the family and arguably the end of childhood for Bani. Bani tells us that as the hearse drives away with Tayta inside he sees 'us all here and now, as though we are being etched in stone, as though we are The Ten Commandments' (156), all except Yocheved. Bani does not know where his younger sister is at the time this story plays out. Yocheved refuses to tell Bani where she was and Ahmad leaves this gap as part of his text, lending ambiguity and complexity to the story's close. Rushdie has noted that 'the past is a country from which we have all migrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity' ('Imaginary Homelands' 12), and thus this episode serves to link Bani still further to the reader.

As Campbell-Hall explains, child narrators 'conveniently provide writers with a platform for addressing dangerous points of view without having to take adult responsibility for expressing these ideas,' (291). In Syal's fiction Campbell-Hall identifies Eastern anger and Western guilt over colonisation (291) as this dangerous idea; in Ahmad's novel Bani is used to expose the physical and sexual violence and male aggression embedded in Bani's complex cultural matrix. The innocence of the child narrator also lends the text its comedy, much of which comes from Bani's colourful descriptions of people and relationships and his misunderstandings of adult concepts. He does not believe, for example, that his Uncle Ibrahim is addicted to ice because 'no one in the family ever uses ice for anything' (27), and from his bedroom window Bani watches Uncle Ibrahim kiss the scantily clad, ever-changing 'girlfriends' he brings back to his room in the garage.

The body as the location and record of human experience and connection

The Tribe pays careful attention to the physical body. It opens with descriptions of the scars on Bani's grandmother's abdomen from the birth of each of her eleven children and closes with her body being taken from the house in a hearse.

Campbell-Hall (293) identifies the physical body as a site of intercultural tension for young second-generation migrants. For Bani this takes the form of anxiety about the colour of his skin. Skin colour is interpreted and reinterpreted throughout *The Tribe*. Bani notes that his grandmother's skin is golden but when he says Elvis and Uncle Ali have brown skin his Dad corrects him: '"You mean olive," he explains, "because Elvis looks like a wog"' (6). Later Bani notes that his uncle's hands are 'white against the skin of a black woman and they are black against the skin of a white woman … and it terrifies me to realise that I am not white, or even worse, not the opposite of white, to at least be able to say what I am. When you're black, even though it's not as good as being white, at least you know you're black' (28). The tension here centres on Bani's understanding that since he is neither black nor white his identity is more complex, leaving him unsure as to who or what he is.

At the close of the first section, 'The House of Adam', attention is drawn to the ninety-nine lines on Bani's hand. Bani asks his grandmother what he is made of, and she responds: 'You are made from your grandfather, oh Bani, and your grandfather, he was made of stone' (35). In this way Bani's body, as well as being a source of tension, also binds Bani to members of the family who are no longer alive.

Bani's body, and that of many of his family members, is also frequently under threat. The risk of physical violence, especially domestic violence, is an ugly reality in *The Tribe*. Uncle Ibrahim, now divorced, is quite open that he used to beat his wife Najwa, who had converted to Islam in order to marry him but as their marriage deteriorated returned to her Christian faith. Uncle Osama 'shouts every day, and he shouts at everyone. Osama kicks his pregnant wife in full view of the family. Bani comments: 'Uncle Osama is lucky Zahra didn't come out mentally disabled – but sometimes I think maybe she did … she's three and still doesn't speak' (29) highlighting the complicity and denial of the true effects of Osama's violence by the adults of The Tribe.

As he grows Bani tries to make sense of the rules that govern the wilful way some family violence is ignored and in other cases retribution is taken (134-35). He also tries to sort out his feelings about his aunts who are the victims of this violence: 'I don't know whether I'm supposed to feel sorry for my aunties or feel angry with them' (135). The book also repeatedly references the

threat of sexual violation although Bani is unsure what to make of this: 'I asked my dad once if I could go to [the local milkbar] by myself. "Do you know what'll happen if someone took you?" he said. "They'll play with your bum." I laughed my heart out' (4). The fear of sexual violation Bani's father expresses here is echoed in the adults' fear and fascination with a homosexual neighbour, Timothy, who is believed not only to have sex with men but also with his dog. Uncle Osama tells the family that he sees Timothy watching porn and Uncle Ali informs Bani that 'pooftas… don't wear any underpants' (22). In a similar way, there is a jokey, macho, barely supressed violence in the way the young men talk to each other and to the young women around them (44-45) during the courtship process narrated in the central section of the book. While 'The Price of Two Sparrows', like *The Tribe*, explores sexuality, and more specifically homosexuality, alongside race, it is not a central theme in any of the three novels discussed in this exegesis.

Place as multiply interpretable

The Tribe contains a number of instances in which place is misinterpreted. As the book opens Bani explains that the House of Adam (where he and his family live) 'is in Alexandria. People sometimes think because we're Arabs, that I mean the city in Egypt, but the Alexandria we're from is actually a suburb in Sydney's inner-west' (4). Later, in a near-perfect reversal of this confusion, Bani reveals that:

> I had Melbourne confused with Lebanon until I was eight. I thought they were the same place and that Melbourne was the English word for Lebanon. I have hundreds of cousins in Melbourne. Each of my mother's brothers and sisters have six kids and their kids are starting to have kids too so it feels like Lebanon, especially since they mostly speak Arabic and only talk with other Lebanese people. Eventually my cousin Hamzeh visited Lebanon, the real Lebanon, and he explained the difference to me. It turned out I'd never been to Lebanon. (60)

The young Bani has a sense that suburban Sydney is not where he truly belongs. The sense of being out of place is common in migration stories, and perhaps a particular challenge for second-generation migrants who lack the before-and-after migration narratives that their first-generation parents can relate. As a result of this sense of displacement Bani believes he belongs in the desert. He tells us that

sometimes he lies in the sunshine in Uncle Ali's room: '[a]s I start to heat up I imagine where I really come from. Not here. I belong in the desert. I belong in the sand. I belong with the camels' (6). But Bani does not get to be in the desert, unless you can count the way he, like all the family, are in orbit around Tayta, whose hourglass-pupils, in the closing lines of the first section, are a metonym for the desert from which the family comes (35).

It is this connection, through his ancestry, that links Bani to the place he feels he belongs. Tayta's death begins to sever a link Bani feels with the place he and his family are from. As his aunts and uncles watch the hearse pull away 'the sands of time shift through them' (156) so that the same time-measuring sands that appeared in Tayta's eyes now run through her children. Tayta's death leaves Bani a little more stranded in Australia, which is both a foreign, sometimes hostile, land and also the only place he has ever known.

The Tribe and 'The Price of Two Sparrows'

While Islam is indispensable to the family at the heart of *The Tribe,* the approach sometimes is perhaps as much cultural as faith-based. H. A. Hellyer has observed that the place of religion and religious identity hold a complex place the immigrants' path into life in their new home country because, unlike their country of origin or ethnicity, religion can, at least theoretically, be relinquished (179). In both *The Tribe* and 'The Price of Two Sparrows,' the cultural and religious are deeply connected. For example, the Moroccan community that wishes to build the mosque in 'The Price of Two Sparrows' is concerned with religion and religious practice, but their understanding of a mosque is broader than simply a place for religious observance. For them the mosque should be a multi-purpose centre, which would address civic, religious and educational needs of the community and thus would serve both cultural and religious needs for Muslims in the area.

In this 'The Price of Two Sparrows' is perhaps closer to the novels of Leila Aboulela, which, according to Tina Steiner, present the idea that a 'spiritual connection to Allah … can assuage feelings of grief and loss, and forge human connections that are unexpected and sometimes transcendent of cultural borders' and in particular that 'prayer (both communal and private) [can]

offer reassurance as well as a ritualised daily structure to the otherwise disoriented characters' (9). The ritual of prayer is essential to Nadia's well-being in her new and rather lonely life, and it is often her religion, at least indirectly, that allows her to connect with the people around her, while in Ahmad's text religion provides comfort and guidelines for living, but daily prayers appear to be absent and the rules around food, clothing and alcohol are frequently ignored.

There is some debate as to how well fiction can depict religion and religious experience (James Wood, Georg Lukacs). However, many commentators believe religion and religious identity still have an essential role to play, especially in migrant fiction, in providing a sense of home, meaning and identity in the face of geographic dislocation (e.g. John A. McClure, Richard Hecht, Tina Steiner and Ileana Dimitriu) and this seems to be borne out by both *The Tribe*, where cultural and religious practices and traditions provide comfort and a sense of identity, and 'The Price of Two Sparrows,' in which several characters are working towards the construction of a mosque in order to have a greater sense of 'home' in their adopted homeland.

Like Salema, in 'The Price of Two Sparrows,' Bani is inclined to romanticise the desert where he believes he belongs: 'I see the piece of land now, like an oasis in the Arabian Desert that Abbas had dreamed up. Sometimes I think I've dreamt up Aunt Mariam in the same way – a faceless relative, veiled among palm trees and fresh water and colourful fruits' (Ahmad 21) just as Julie, in *The Pickup,* briefly entertains a similar fantasy when shown the fertility of the oasis in the desert.

'The Price of Two Sparrows' includes a number of migrant stories. Although there are no child-migrant narratives, the flashbacks to Heico's childhood experience of moving with his mother from Australia to her homeland, Holland, after his parents' divorce does roughly fit into the second phase of migrant fiction identified here. Usually, in books from this phase, a second-generation child or adolescent must find a way to cope with the two cultures of home and school as part of the multi-generational process of integration into the family's new home. In 'The Price of Two Sparrows' this takes a slightly different form as it is represented by the young Heico who, having completed primary school in Australia, moves to his mother's home country when his parents' marriage fails. Heico watches as his mother initially reverts to a childlike dependence on her own parents in the wake of her

divorce.

Heico has a Dutch passport and a Dutch parent and grandparents but he still sometimes struggles with the adjustment to his new country and he, like all 'caught-in-between' protagonists, must negotiate his own way through the challenges of the schoolyard. Heico doesn't have physical features that distinguish him from his classmates and as such they sometimes forget that he is not entirely one of them, but his language skills are insufficient for school and his life experiences make him different enough to be targeted by bullies. Further, there are things his peers take for granted, like the monthly air-raid-siren tests, that unsettle him.

There are also compensations for this new life including the freedom his mother affords him to explore his new home on his bike and he finds he is no longer required to go to church on Sundays. Nevertheless, even as an adult, Heico continues to feel oppressed by the constrained space and highly urbanised lifestyle in the Netherlands and feels a sense of relief when he is able 'escape' to the dunes or the forested areas which echo the greater sense of space and nature he remembers from his childhood in Australia.

The Tribe is exemplary of the second, 'caught-in-between,' phase of migrant fiction and Ahmad's text – along with many of the books that fall into this category – manages to create a bridge between his narrator and his reader that helps to break down the distance the reader might feel between their own experience and the protagonist's. Heico's story in 'The Price of Two Sparrows' is an idiosyncratic example of a story from this phase of migrant literature it but it does demonstrate some of the typical features of this phase including the displaced adolescent narrator struggling with identity and belonging while also dealing with the challenges of school and growing up.

Ahmad's work – both his fiction and his work with the literacy and creative arts project 'Sweatshop,' founded to empower young people in West Sydney – is the work of resistance informed by his experience and education (Fogg). Samina Yasmeen argues that Islam is often placed in opposition to 'the West' as if one can belong to one but not both of these spheres, but that this is a false dichotomy that ignores the plurality of views on each side. In *The Tribe*, Ahmad's alter-ego, Bani, as a child protagonist, is able to 'introduce and negotiate the tensions arising between the host

and original cultures' (Campbell-Hall 292), and, indeed, the text achieves something slightly more: Ahmad brings us in, with Bani's gentle explanations, and unites his voice with ours so that, ultimately, the second-generation migrant narrator is able to move the discourse from 'a simple cultural binary of "insider/outsider" to a far more complex yet far more mundane "us"' (Campbell-Hall 303). Bani's narration collapses the them-and-us binary by the sharing of his apprehension of the world. He positions himself as one of us where 'we' reflect the complex, pluralistic Australia we know is the country we actually inhabit.

III. CONTESTED SPACE IN AMY WALDMAN'S *THE SUBMISSION*

A third phase of the migrant experience is explored in Amy Waldman's *The Submission* in which second-, and later-generation migrants must navigate their relationship to the country in which they were born, in the context of an increasingly globalised world. This book, like 'The Price of Two Sparrows,' deals with first-, second- and later-generation migrants, many of whom are fully engaged in the civic life of their cities and countries. In both *The Submission* and 'The Price of Two Sparrows' the conflict centres around a proposed physical artefact (for Waldman a memorial garden, in 'The Price of Two Sparrows' a mosque) which stirs up controversy and resistance in the political and social landscape. This conflict forms much of the substance and broad social context of the novels both of which are set against real historical backdrops, namely 9/11 in *The Submission* and the assassinations of Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh in 'The Price of Two Sparrows.'

Gunew has suggested that the writer might be considered as 'inventor of community where community is conceived … as the impulse forward, the potential carried by the seeing of diaspora in hybridity, the reality of a process more easily recognized here and now as hegemonic groups within the nation are forced to accommodate the third- and fourth-generation descendants of major migrations' (109). Waldman's *The Submission* describes the challenges for society in responding to first- and second-generation Muslim immigrants, and for the immigrants themselves in making a civic contribution, in a time vexed by violence, terrorism, and religious and cultural conflict. Released to coincide with the ten-year-anniversary of 9/11, *The Submission* is a New York novel and an alternative history in which the winner of an architecture contest for designing the 9/11 monument, to be located at Ground Zero, is revealed to be a (secular) Muslim and second-generation immigrant. The conflicts this scenario causes at the micro- and macro-levels form the substance of the novel. Schoene believes that realist cosmopolitan fiction 'appeals to our conscience as much as our imaginations, yet its chief aim is … to make us see by involving us in an experience – always focalised and yet never entirely by proxy – of the world as it is' (179). By using a fictional scenario, Waldman allows her reader to reflect on the real tensions, hypocrisies and bureaucracies that protect

the status quo, and challenge the civic contributions immigrant populations are able to make.

Shameem Black has observed that 'given its capacity for multivocality, the genre of fiction is … well suited to the task of considering diverse and even conflicting perspectives simultaneously' (9). Waldman has taken full advantage of this capacity in *The Submission.* She weaves multiple characters' stories to create a single narrative, effectively evoking a complex, multi-faceted civic conflict.

At the centre of the novel are Mo and Claire. Mo, or Mohammed Khan, is an American-born architect whose parents emigrated from India in the 1960s. He is a rising talent at a prestigious architecture firm in New York. Claire Burwell is an attractive 9/11 widow and the mother of two young children. Her late husband, Cal, had family money and so Claire is free to pursue her chosen causes without concern for how she will provide for her family.

The arguments for and against the proposed memorial garden run from empty media-speak – 'the problem with Islam is Islam' (119) – to the more sophisticated views represented by Claire, Paul (chairman of the memorial jury) and the members of the Muslim Association Coordinating Council. Likewise, a wide range of motives lies behind the arguments expressed: pride, grief, filial duty, ambition and moral and political outrage.

Early reviewers saw the book as a political novel. Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times* praised the book's 'big historical backdrop and pointillist emotional detail' (C1), saying that the novel 'reminds us how inextricably linked the personal and the political, the private and the public have become in our post-9/11 world' (C4). Later, however, Jessa Crispin, reviewing the novel for *Architect* and leaning rather heavily on the architecture metaphor, felt the book was 'stony' and sunk under the 'weight of all the facts and figures' (72-73). 'It's only a shame,' Crispin concludes, 'that Waldman was not up to building a solid structure on [her 9/11] foundation' (75).

It is perhaps as a 9/11 novel that *The Submission* is at its most literary. Paul remembers 'a silence of Pompeian density' (14) and his wife 'Edith call[ing], sobbing 'It's falling down, it's falling down,' the nursery-rhyme words, then the mobile network went dead,' (14). Sean, who lost his brother in the 9/11 attacks, is described as searching for his brother in 'some new kind of underwater'

and Claire is haunted by the weirdness of having been submerged in water, swimming, while Cal, her husband, was engulfed in fire (35) and by unfinished conversations and everyday 'fossils' of the lost (36).

Submission

Waldman's book begins and ends with a submission. The first is Mo's winning entry in the architecture contest and the second is the withdrawal of his design at the request of Claire Burwell and the Muslim Association Coordinating Council who had once supported him. It is interesting to note that the short film that led to Van Gogh's assassination (which features in 'The Price of Two Sparrows') as well as Michel Houellebecq's novel released the day of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris, are both also titled 'Submission.' The three uses of an almost identical title (Houellebecq's, Waldman's and Van Gogh's) come from the literal translation of the word 'Islam.' In each case the author is utilising various resonances of this word. Waldman's title primarily references an architect's submission to a design contest; Houellebecq's use of submission might almost be closer to 'resignation'; Van Gogh's points to Muslim women's submission to their husbands and fathers described in his film, and that he expects his Western viewers to deplore and condemn.

Waldman includes many references to 'submission' in her novel. For example, Sean reflects on the emptiness of the protest action in which he is engaged. Their defiance, Sean observes, is 'nothing more than managed submission' (170). Whereas Mo himself concludes, at the end of the novel, that to forget oneself is the truest submission (318). Matthew Leggatt suggests that 'the sacrifice made by Khan is indicative of a "submission" of American Muslims generally, who must give up certain rights in order to reside in a post-9/11 United States' (217). Claire Messud adds another reading, when she argues that the title refers to the question: 'to whose will should the jury and, more broadly the city and the state, submit?' (21).

The resonance of the title throughout the novel acts as scaffolding, to borrow a metaphor from architecture, so that the links made between the various submissions draw the storylines together. Many of the characters back down to some degree from their initial stance. For example, Claire drops her support for, and Sean drops his resistance to, Mo's design. One of the few characters who refuses

to submit is Mo's ally and erstwhile girlfriend, Laila, but she is ultimately powerless in the face of the outrage and tragedy that has resulted, directly and indirectly, from the selection of Mo's submission.

All the main characters' allegiances are challenged throughout Waldman's novel. When groups on each side of the fence try to cooperate, the complexity of the issues creates further tensions for everyone. Sean is uncomfortable partnering with Debbie Dawson's adherents who carry highlighted Qur'ans and chant slogans containing words he does not understand. Eventually he finds himself at events with people he considers 'nut jobs' (168) carrying offensive posters, and his own poster begins to seem 'creepy' (168) when surrounded by those of the more extreme activists opposed to the memorial garden.

In a similar way, as the conflict escalates, Mo begins to find himself on the wrong side not just of conservatives but of *The New Yorker*. After the public meeting to discuss the memorial, Claire publically withdraws her support for Mo's design and Sean privately tells his mother he will no longer fight the design, so that in the end it is more Claire than Sean, perhaps, who defeats Mo's memorial garden submission.

Race, religion and racism

Sonia Baelo-Allue argues that while most 9/11 narratives 'lack … encounter[s] with "the other"'(174), and that 'even bearing witness to the culturally other is missing in most 9/11 early novels' (174). This is not a criticism that can be levelled at *The Submission*. Waldman's novel pays close attention to how characters think about race and religious affiliation as the events of the book unfold. She is interested in Mo's experience of, and ambivalence about, the racism he faces, and Asma's victimhood for stepping outside her role as silent, invisible, illegal immigrant. She also interrogates Claire's determinedly open-minded stance and Paul's anxiety about saying, and even thinking, the right things in an age of political correctness.

But not everyone is as concerned about these matters as Paul. Waldman juxtaposes Mo's exhilaration at learning of his winning memorial design with the bizarre racism of the way the news reaches him – via the cover of *The Post* bearing an image of an anonymous Islamic terrorist. But even before his design is revealed as the winner of the contest, Mo's world is filled with casual – and

sometimes overt – racism. A video depicting a 'dark-skinned cartoon man with a beard and backpack' with a bomb is used to kick off an architectural meeting on 'Design Against Terrorism,' at which one of the architects suggests, in frustration, that perhaps they should simply 'get rid of Muslims,' (49).

As a consequence of the pervasiveness of the racism and suspicion he is faced with, Mo finds it hard to know when he is being victimised. When his colleague suggests that perhaps his boss, Roi, considers Mo an asset for the embassy project in Kabul Mo responds: 'What, with my special insight into the terrorist mind?' (49). Initially he cannot decide 'whether he should tell Roi to fuck himself' (49), but decides to take the trip to Kabul anyway. Similarly Mo is antagonistic to the airport authorities, who almost cause him to miss his flight, but ultimately capitulates to their fingerprinting him, and later, in an argument with his girlfriend, he defends them saying: 'I'm not going to pretend all Muslims can be trusted. If Muslims are the reason they're doing searches in the first place, why shouldn't Muslims be searched?' (45-46). Perhaps as a consequence of his own complex position in society, Mo is interested in minority groups: how they behave, how they are perceived, and how they behave because of how they are (or think they are being) perceived (44). He senses that his own behaviour in the airport interrogation room is in part drawn out of him by the way his interrogators expect him to behave.

In one of the most explicit acts of religious intolerance depicted in the novel, Sean yanks off the headscarf of a young Muslim woman (171) but comes to regret this despite anti-Islam activist Debbie Dawson's approbation: 'It's an act of liberation' (191). Later Sean is struck by the lack of the anticipated difference between his victim and himself: '[e]ver since she first spoke he had been trying to pinpoint what struck him as odd in her speech, and now he had it. It was the lack of accent. She sounded as American as he did' (204). The young Muslim woman's lack of a foreign accent Americanises her and so Sean is able to find common ground with her and his attitude begins to shift – so much so that Sean begins to sense that he has moved too far towards 'the other side' (206). As a result he begins to back-pedal, asserting that although he is sorry for the headscarf incident, he 'will never apologize for not wanting anything Islamic connected to this memorial' (207), effectively undoing the step he has just taken towards mutual understanding between the two groups on a broad,

symbolic scale as well as on an interpersonal one.

Waldman's narrative also tests the tolerance of both Paul and Claire by facing them with Mo's refusal to defend his design or to categorically deny that his inspiration was an Islamic garden. Ultimately, Mo's supporters fail to shepherd his design to implementation and it is Claire who spearheads the press conference to request he withdraw his design. Janet Potter has reflected on the racism in the book and the weakening of Claire's position prompts her to ask: 'Are you a racist only if you actively dislike and try to oppress a group of people? Or is the exasperated inaction of Paul and Claire a kind of secondary racism?' (48). Claire later comes to regret her actions but perhaps this is more for her own sake (her preferred memorial garden is replaced by a banal flag-centred memorial meant to unite everyone) than for the sake of the larger principle, of tolerance and open-mindedness, for which she once stood.

This matter, of indirect or secondary racism, is also a key concern in 'The Price of Two Sparrows' in which some characters act in ways that are not motivated by xenophobia but which others can co-opt to their more dubious causes. For example the results of Heico's surveys and Juliaan's journalism are picked up and duplicated by fear-mongering anti-immigration websites. The men react differently to this once it has happened. Although the material makes Heico feel ill when he encounters it, he feels no responsibility for this. It is Juliaan who feels in some way responsible for the long delays on the mosque approval and who ultimately asks Heico to withdraw his submission – not because it is inaccurate, but because it can be, and has been, used to support more questionable arguments.

Similarly, Salema's role as the head architect on the mosque project is questioned because she is seen as the beneficiary of unofficial affirmative action. For Salema cultural and gender norms conspire to increase the challenges to her authority and expertise. Although it is likely she has worked very hard to be in the position she is, Heico and others question her capability, assuming she has been appointed for reasons other than her competence as an architect.

Representations of migrants

Waldman's text depicts migrants with different levels of integration into American society. She includes the viewpoint of a well-integrated secular Muslim, Mo, as well as the non-English-speaking widow of an illegal immigrant, Asama. Mo is shocked to find himself an enemy of the society he feels a part of as a well-educated, professional, second-generation migrant. Waldman contrasts his experience with Asama's need to find and articulate her point of view in her adopted country, despite her tenuous residency status (Asama is, in this, in a similar position to Abdu in South Africa in Gordimer's *The Pickup*). Both Mo and Asama suffer extreme consequences for daring to stick their heads above the parapet (a mistake, incidentally, that Abdu is very careful not to make, though to little avail: he is deported anyway). Asama is murdered and Mo feels he is left with no option but to withdraw his submission and leave the country.

Natalie Friedman has observed, in an article on the fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri, that 'Lahiri's depictions of the elite class of Western-educated Indians and their children's relationship to both India and America dismantle the stereotype of brown-skinned immigrant families that are always outsiders to American culture and recasts them as cosmopolites, members of a shifting network of global travellers whose national loyalties are flexible' (112). This is also true of Waldman's Mo. The child of Indian immigrants, Mo thinks nothing of travelling to London and Kabul for work and it is not until these travels (and indeed his loyalties to America) are questioned that he thinks much about these work trips at all. Friedman goes on to point out that:

> Lahiri is part of a vanguard of … American writers whose novels, short fiction, and memoirs suggest that assimilation … is no longer at the heart of the immigrant story. Instead of shedding the trappings of the home culture and throwing himself headlong into the work of Americanizing, the protagonist of the contemporary immigrant novel – whether an immigrant or a child born to immigrants – is more concerned with his or her dual identity as it manifests itself in America and in the shrinking global community. (112)

This description also aptly describes Waldman's Mo (though not, perhaps, Asama) who, far from hurrying to assimilate, refuses to explain himself and his memorial design, which ultimately costs him

the prestigious commission. Rather than rushing to Americanise himself for the public, Mo senses himself being 'erased' as the Muslim Association Coordinating Council push forward with their campaign to try to 'humanize' him: 'he felt like a new product being rolled out to market' (194). Later Mo's lawyer, Reiss, also wants to 'humanize' and 'Americanize' him (235), asking for family albums and Boy Scout medals and echoing the Muslim Association Coordinating Council's call for television commercials which Mo, again, refuses. '"No ads"' (235) he tells Reiss, unwilling to 'reassure his own compatriots that he [isn't] to be feared' (235).

After Claire's call for Mo to withdraw his design, Mo feels his only option is to leave the U.S., which had 'offered his immigrant parents the freedom to reinvent themselves' (330), while he, on the other hand, 'found himself reinvented by others, so distorted he couldn't recognize himself' (330). In the end it is international success that serves to Americanise Mo. By the time we reach the epilogue (set twenty years after the main action of the novel) there has even been a retrospective of his career in the Museum of New Architecture in New York titled 'Mohammad Khan, American Architect' (323), though the epilogue's narrator reports that after two decades away he is now 'American only in name' (322). There is not a single Mohammed Khan building in America and we learn that Mo did not attend the exhibition's opening, knowing that it would fail to satisfy his need for an 'acknowledgement of the wrong done to him' (323). He hopes the documentary being made about the memorial incident might 'elicit the conversation, the apology, he wanted' (324).

The tone of the novel's conclusion is resigned. Things have moved on, many of the wrongs have been righted, though Mo remains bitter about the experience, decades later. Nevertheless, his garden has been built – in a slightly altered form – for an emir in India. Although the garden is no longer a 9/11 memorial, Mo's video message for Claire ('use your imagination') is not necessary because her son has surreptitiously constructed a pile of stones, a cairn like the one they built in the front yard when he was a child, to commemorate his father in a corner of the garden. So Claire gets a fragment of the memorial she had worked towards decades before.

Religion and terrorism

The Submission is interested in the interactions between those who approach their Islamic faith in different ways. Laila, for example, feels an outsider at the Muslim Association Coordinating Council because she does not wear a hijab, and Mo's case is almost not taken on by the group in part because as a secular Muslim he is simply not Muslim enough to warrant the focus of their limited resources. Mo's attitudes are contrasted with those of his more observant parents, although for a time he chooses to return to observing Ramadan as a way of coping with the events he finds himself at the centre of.

Just as Waldman's characters differ in their religiosity and attitudes to Islam, the characters in 'The Price of Two Sparrows' also have various relationships with religion generally and with Islam in particular. Heico and Eliza both hold broadly tolerant attitudes towards Islam, although, at least for Heico, his more rational response may not always completely accord with his emotional reactions to organised religion in general. Youssef and Nadia are observant Muslims. Salema has a more distant relationship to her family's religion, although she wears the hijab and is deeply committed to the mosque project and to designing a beautiful and good object for God. The attitudes the two architects, *The Submission*'s Mo and 'The Price of Two Sparrows' Salema, hold towards Islam (and to architecture), while quite different still present some similarities.

Islam's hold on Mo is weak but not non-existent. In Kabul he wakes to the pre-dawn call to prayer which 'pinned him in place although it was meant to rouse him. Sinuous, cavernous, the voice scaled to the edge of breaking, then firmed. It was lonely. It was masterful. In the darkness men rose, washed, bent to prayer. Mo trailed them in his imagination before slipping back into sleep' (50). Mo remains conflicted about his religious identity and faith throughout his life. In the epilogue we learn that even though he remains uncertain about the existence of God he does have a sense of 'God's will' in his life (330). He occasionally has the urge to pray and, indeed, on rare occasions his very uncertainty about God 'seem[s] like faith itself' (330).

In this Mo seems an echo of Virginia Woolf's Lily Briscoe. In the closing section of *To the Lighthouse* (1927) Lily paints her 'attempt at something' (305). As James Wood notes, 'the spreading apprehension that the very vagueness of that invisible "something" that we are all seeking beyond the

senses makes it mystical, pushes it beyond the reach of the aesthetic form. The indefinability of the 'something' is what goads Woolf's art into art' (105). Woolf's work, Wood claims, 'is full of the sense that art is an "incessant unmethodical pacing" around meaning rather than towards it, and that this continuous circling is art's straightest metaphysical path' (105). This description is broadly applicable to Waldman's text too, in that the text, for all its 'pacing,' does not provide the reader with any easy solutions – neither about religion, nor about the dilemma Waldman has set out for us. And even when the reader is finally given the piece of information about the inspiration for the memorial, that so many of Mo's interrogators are requesting, we are still no closer to knowing how the story should play out. As a result, Waldman's novel must end in an anti-climax. The memorial cannot be built and the later regrets of Claire and the ambivalence of Mo do nothing to assuage the deflation of Mo's submission and withdrawal.

Waldman's book includes many reflections and observations that serve to distance terrorism from the religion of Islam. This is most explicitly possible via the mouthpieces of the members of the Muslim Association Coordinating Council. Claire and Paul are also careful to draw this distinction and Mo reflects that the terrorists represent Islam no more than he and his family do (32). Of Waldman's point-of-view characters, only the dutiful Sean is depicted as potentially capable of performing an act of terror. Sean has a moment of apparent empathy with the terrorists when his mother asks him to stop Mo's design becoming the memorial for his brother Patrick: 'The look in her gray eyes – what was it? He'd never seen it, not from her. Pleading. His hard mother admitting her need. If, at that moment, she had asked him to strap on a bomb and blow up someone or something, he probably would have' (133). Sean's sense of duty to his family replaces the suicide bombers' ideology but the result is the same: he is willing – at least initially – to do whatever it takes to stop the memorial.

As Richard Hecht (following Paul Tillich) notes, 'religion is about "ultimate concern." The ultimate is articulated and registered through symbolic communication, symbolic behavior, through symbolic places, objects and persons' (60). It is not surprising that many of the book's characters read the memorial as religious since 'religion is the carrier of meaning' (60), and this meaning may be

made through symbols, rituals and traditions, or through acts of terror. Many of Waldman's characters – and the citizens of her New York more broadly – cannot help recalling the terror of 9/11 when presented with symbols that evoke Islam.

What offends Debbie Dawson about the proposed garden is the 'attempt to claim our most sacred space' (147), the site of the 9/11 attacks. She is not interested in fighting terrorists; she is much more afraid of the non-violent Muslims who she claims, are 'trying to make this piece of land Dar al-Islam' (147). Sean suggests claiming the contested space with their bodies: 'we'll lay our bodies down on [the ground zero site], and not leave until they agree to hold a new memorial competition' (147). However, on the day of the protest, Sean experiences the action as stagey and futile. Waldman suggests he also feels that the seriousness of his own objection is undermined by Debbie Dawson's circus of staged intolerance, offensive slogans and islamaphobia.

Architecture

The focus on buildings in Waldman's text reflects, for the first time in the three novels discussed, the substantial material contribution to the society by the migrant, in the form of the physical buildings that Mo designs. Mo's father, Salman, claims that buildings are Mo's religion, though Salman himself is sceptical of their power and he warns his son: 'they shouldn't keep you from God, and they can't bring you to Him' (239), alhough in the epilogue Mo reflects that if he could find faith it would be through his craft (331). In this his view is similar to Salema's in 'The Price of Two Sparrows': Salema, though not strongly religious, does seem to believe that a building might help in connecting humans with the transcendent.

In *The Submission*, architecture is also a way of talking about the creative process itself. Mo reflects that a skyline is 'a collaboration if an inadvertent one' (32), but in the end he and his supporters fail to gain sufficient cooperation for his memorial to form a part of the New York skyline. As such, the central problem in Waldman's novel can be articulated as one of meaning. The interpretation of Mo's garden memorial is the central concern of the novel and of all its characters.

In Waldman's novel, architecture is expected to carry a lot of metaphorical weight. Buildings and memorials are seen as far more than the sum of their material parts. The intention of the 9/11

memorial, in real life as well as in *The Submission*, is in part to heal a nation. Indeed, Paul articulates this differently: '[t]he memorial was meant to tame them' (15), where 'them' is the type of American who has been transformed by the trauma of 9/11 into 'traumatized victim,' 'charged-up avenger,' 'queasy voyeur,' or indeed all three of these things (15). In a similar way, a number of characters in 'The Price of Two Sparrows' want the mosque to be the centre for a community and provide a sense of home and identity to the growing Muslim population in the area. Both projects demand design briefs that draw on more than mere material resources and this is where community support becomes essential and problematic in both novels.

Baelo-Allue cites James Young's argument that choosing a single memorial design – in real life – was fraught, due to the 'fundamental tension between the families' need for closure and the contemporary artist's need to articulate unredeemable loss' (173). She argues that since Mo 'refuses to withdraw or even explain his design, the memorial fails as a place around which the nation can reconcile' (171). Instead 'it becomes a new site of cultural trauma that forces society to confront its own notion of freedom, tolerance, non-discrimination and equal opportunity policies' (171). As a result many of those most closely connected to the memorial suffer, often in ways only tangentially connected to their original grief, in the course of their involvement with the memorial decision process.

Waldman's garden is in some ways analogous to the mosque in 'The Price of Two Sparrows' though how religious Mo's memorial design is remains a vexed point right to the end of Waldman's novel. 'The Price of Two Sparrows' also features a Muslim architect though her role is less prominent and less controversial than that of Waldman's architect. Ultimately Mohammed Khan's design for the 9/11 memorial in *The Submission* cannot be built and the mosque in 'The Price of Two Sparrows' is similarly ill-fated due to the prevailing political, social and, in the case of the mosque, environmental circumstances in the time and place they are proposed.

During the course of my doctoral candidature I undertook field research in the Netherlands to speak to people and observe the birds that inhabit the sand dune area adjacent to the wealthy, seaside suburbs of Heemstede and Aerdenhout, a fictionalised version of which is the location of the bird

sanctuary in 'The Price of Two Sparrows.' Among those I spoke to was Turkish-born architect Merve Bedir. I had based the mosque in 'The Price of Two Sparrows' on a design that her company had entered into a competition for the commission for the Pristina Mosque. This design was not selected for Pristina and it has not yet been realised elsewhere. I spoke to Ms Bedir in Rotterdam and she was excited that her design was finding a home – if only in fiction. The architect in 'The Price of Two Sparrows' is not based on Ms Bedir but I drew on some of her passion and ideas in fleshing out my architect Salema.

In an interesting resonance with 'The Price of Two Sparrows,' Waldman's Mo claims, of his memorial design, 'If anything, it's meant to evoke the layout of the city it will sit in' (156). This perhaps unconsciously Islamic idea reflects and to some extent inverts Salema's desire, in accordance with the traditional principles of Islamic architecture, to echo the North Sea sand dunes in her mosque design. Salema's approach, though well intentioned, is problematic in its over-simplified understanding of the Dutch coastal dunes – with their unique ecosystem and their role in protecting the surrounding areas from erosion – as directly comparable to the desert sand dunes of the Sahara.

In Waldman's novel Claire suggests that approving the garden memorial 'will send a message, a good message, that in America it doesn't matter what your name is … your name is no bar to entering a competition like this, or to winning it' (20). Similarly, Najib in 'The Price of Two Sparrows' believes that the mosque will allow the city to demonstrate that dialogue and cooperation between Muslims and the broader community is possible and productive, even in the wake of the assassination of the controversial filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a young Muslim man. Both characters make a plea for a progressive move in order to send a message of harmony and cooperation in the face of conflict. In both cases these courses of action are ultimately not taken, out of fear of enflaming further hatred in a politically volatile moment.

Where our novels differ is in our level of interest in the lives of our characters outside of the central external conflict of the novel. Messud writes of Waldman's novel that it 'remains a novel about the unfolding of a dramatic situation – a historian's novel – rather than a novel that explores the human condition with any profundity' (21). She claims this effect is due to Waldman's 'decision to

remain at a certain remove from [her] central characters' (21). Waldman's is a big, journalistic novel in many ways while 'The Price of Two Sparrows' has a greater focus on the inner lives and under-articulated relationship dynamics at play in the lives of my characters. Its canvas is smaller and its focus more interior than *The Submission*. But both comment on larger societal trends as well as on the specific historical moments they depict as seen through the eyes of a select group of people in order to unpack some of the implications of the way we live and interact with each other in a changing world.

CONCLUSION

As the above discussion shows, the literature of migration in general, and of Islamic migration in particular, takes many different forms and covers a variety of subject matter. In all three of the phases I have identified, Islamic immigration literature reflects the complex interrelationship between cultures and individuals – characterised by Bhabha in terms of third space – that result from the human interactions that occur as part of the multigenerational process of migration and which result, as Bhabha and others have noted, in a wholly new situation that is not a direct result of the host culture or the immigrant culture but rather of the interaction between the two.

Schoene believes it is the role of art and literature to provide the cosmopolitan imagination needed to shift the way we think from an 'imperialist dynamic of psycho-geographical self-determination and instead begin to think of ourselves beyond territory, conquest and resistance as a … community of world citizens' (182-183). He argues that the novel 'has always been a superb instrument of capturing the spirit of the age, as well as anticipating the imminent future, without resorting to facile projection or crass proselytising' (183). All three of the novels discussed succeed in these terms. Walter Mignolo believes that 'globalization is a set of designs to manage the world while cosmopolitanism is a set of projects towards planetary conviviality' (157). All of the texts discussed in this thesis might be considered as part of this project, and can be characterised as 'cosmopolitan,' though the blanket term seems to obscure their diversity. Ahmad's careful second-generation story attempts to build a connection between his (Western) reader and his immigrant subjects, while Gordimer's novel asks the reader to consider the politics of migration decisions, especially those that do not proceed from margin to centre, and to reflect on what might be required for a Westerner to responsibly migrate to a country that is more often considered as a source of migrants than their destination. Meanwhile, Waldman's novel, by approaching a large-scale, multi-faceted civic conflict, challenges readers to check their own biases and hypocrisies with regard to Islam and Islamic migrants and calls into question the limits to Western ideas of tolerance and integration, allowing the reader to consider issues that in the real world are often obscured by platitudes and politics.

'The Price of Two Sparrows' encompasses at least some aspects of all three phases of migrant

fiction that I have set out in this exegesis. Nadia's story falls into the first phase as she resettles and begins to build a new home for herself in her new country. Over the course of the text she studies the language, learns to ride a bike and begins to feel at home in the Netherlands. Her role as a relative outsider gives her clarity in the way she views the mosque project, so that when others are bogged down in local politics and planning concerns it is Nadia who is able to articulate the true value of the mosque for the community.

Heico's childhood move to the Netherlands falls into the second phase where a child-migrant must navigate their way between two value systems and two sets of cultural expectations. Heico's story differs somewhat from the most common version of this story in that his family does not represent the old country values since his mother's family are all Dutch. The old country values in Heico's case are represented by his own memories of his early years in Australia and by the language skills and cultural expectations he still carries from his father's homeland and the country in which he was born.

The third phase is represented by Salema's story. Salema has begun to secularise but still values her religious identity. She is ambitious and is experiencing some early success in her career as an architect, but the conflict around the mosque project precipitates attitudes – even from those who think of themselves as open-minded – that demonstrate that her gender and religion continue to determine the way she is viewed as a professional and affect how seriously she is taken in a world where most of the decisions are made by white men.

The novel as a literary form, with its capacity to get inside an individual's experience, is particularly well suited to depicting the complex experiences of immigration and assimilation into a new culture. Immigrant fiction, more generally, has an important role to play in our current geo-political moment. It is important, especially for young people, to see themselves reflected in (immigrant) fiction in the way that Ahmad reports that he and his Muslim classmates saw themselves in the story of Italian-Australian Josie Alibrandi in Melina Marchetta's *Looking for Alibrandi*. Further, we can expect to see a continuing emergence of new stories over the coming decades reflecting new trends in migration including more stories of migration from Africa and the Middle East as well as

increasing numbers of novels that fall into the third, or 'civic contribution', phase I have identified in this thesis as immigrants are encouraged and empowered to tell their own stories in their own words.

These stories, the ones we have now and the ones that are yet to be written, are a way for us all to understand and reflect upon the complexity of the personal and public stories behind the news stories. As such they are just as important to the 'host' cultures as they are to members of the immigrant groups themselves.

Ultimately this was my aim for 'The Price of Two Sparrows': I wanted it to be a novel that grapples with some of the complexity we are currently experiencing as immigration – in all its forms – becomes an increasingly dominant geopolitical reality. In 'The Price of Two Sparrows' the complexity involves gender, race, religion, sexuality and a number of different types of migration (expat, return to the country of one's parent's birth, as well as migration for economic and family formation purposes) into a relatively homogenous society. The three novels discussed in this exegesis each make a contribution to our understanding of the human side of migration. In this, I believe that 'The Price of Two Sparrows' can sit alongside them.

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